

sojourners

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Faith in Action for Social Justice

How Right-Wing Billionaires Are Attempting a Hostile Takeover of the Catholic Church

by Tom Roberts



PLUS:

On being a black pastor in a small Southern town

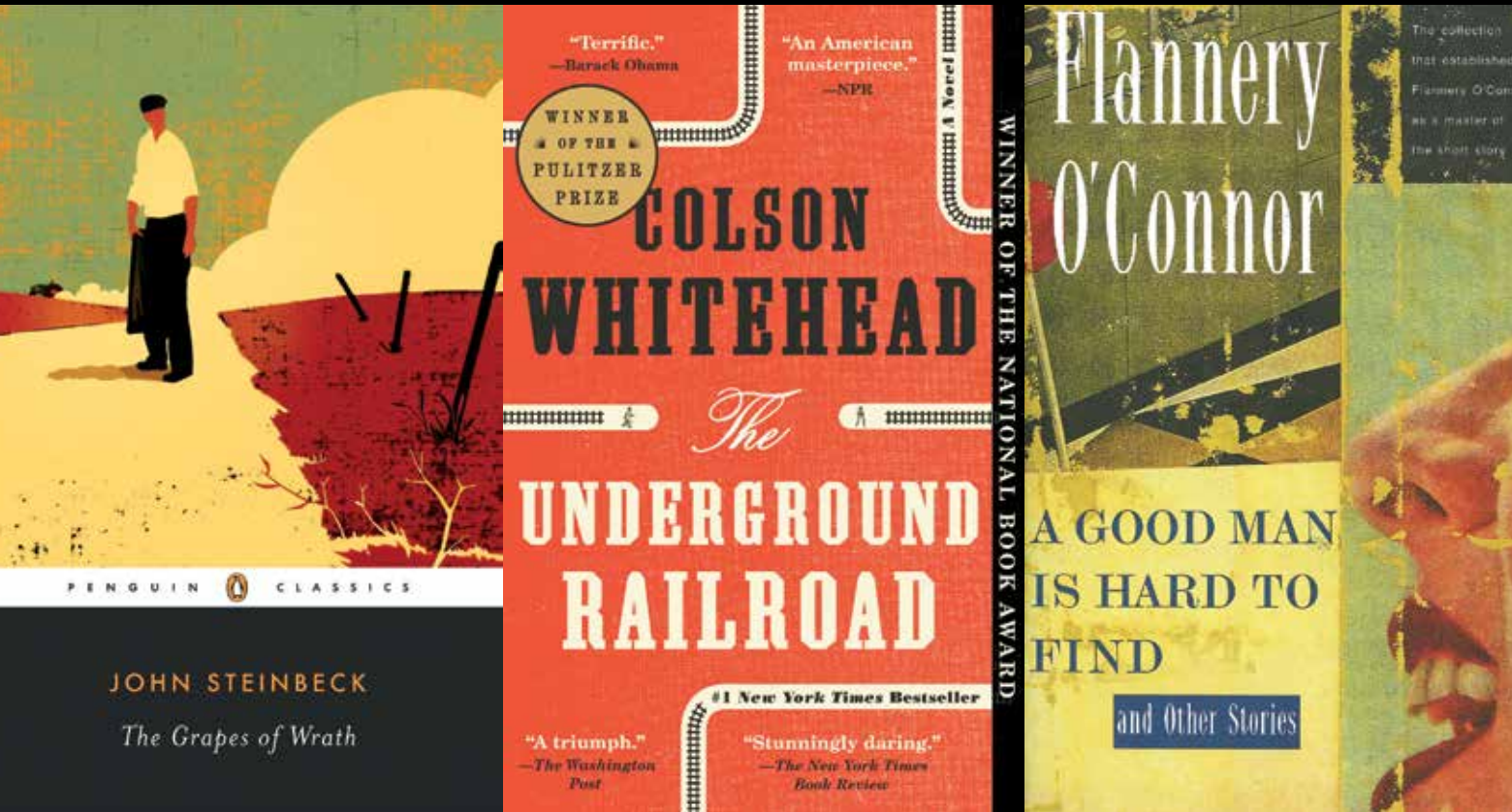
Quieting our souls in a tumultuous world

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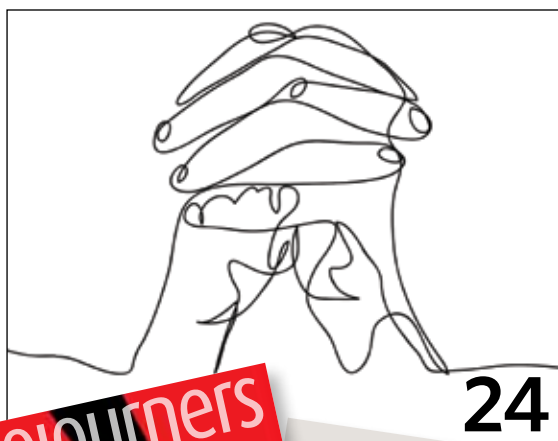
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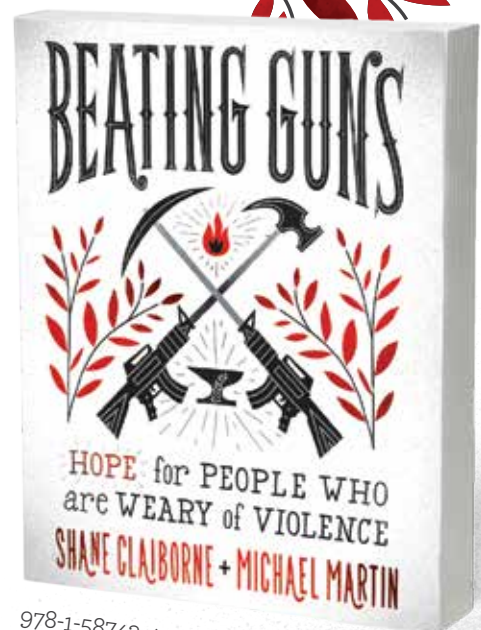
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"SOJOURNERS IS MY favorite Catholic magazine," readers occasionally tell us. Even though we're an ecumenical Christian magazine with evangelical-ish roots, the compliment always makes us blush with pride. As we see it, if these pages resonate with Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelicals alike (as well as folks from Pentecostal, Orthodox, and other traditions), we must be doing something right.

In this interdenominational spirit, we publish "The Rise of the Catholic Right," by Tom Roberts, executive editor of *National Catholic Reporter*. Through careful investigative work, Roberts offers an in-depth look at how private—and wealthy—conservative Catholic organizations are using money to exert undue influence in achieving their

right-wing political and theological agendas.

It's a compelling story, dotted with fancy cocktail receptions, snazzy resorts, and billions of dollars in assets, but there's a deeper issue at stake than extravagant wealth. These right-wing groups exhibit a "devotion to individualism, unrestricted capitalism, and diminishment of government services, especially to the poor and marginalized," that "run counter to the central tenets of Catholic social teaching."

This unholy alliance of money, politics, and religion is not unique to Roman Catholicism; as Roberts points out, what's



happening today on the arch-conservative fringes of Catholicism mirrors the rise of the Religious Right in 1980s evangelicalism.

"As we know, the mentality that would cover things up, far from helping to resolve conflicts, enabled them to fester and cause even greater harm," wrote Pope Francis in a recent letter to the U.S. Catholic bishops concerning clergy sexual abuse. Likewise, by shining a light on things done in the dark, we hope to help the whole church stay faithful to the gospel of Jesus—a gospel that is *always* good news to the poor. ■

Letters

Spiritual Immaturity

Our current technology is one of the most powerful and amazing gifts our civilization has. "Big Tech" enables deaf people to communicate via sign language over visual phones. "Big Tech" enables patients to remotely control electrostimulation implants, to control chronic pain without narcotics. For me, "Big Tech" has fulfilled a decades-long dream of sharing my awe at God's majesty in nature via photos to viewers all over the world. How we use our technology equates to the level of spiritual maturity in our civilization. The abuses Gaymon Bennett appropriately cites in his article "Silicon Valley's Original Sin" (January 2019) are symptoms of spiritual immaturity that are burdening our civilization. For our civilization to survive, we must begin to awaken awe, wonder, and spiritual awareness in our daily lives.

Stephen Eric Levine
Garland, Texas

Too Little, Too Late

I found Danny Duncan Collum's castigation of Paul Simon in his article "Graceless in 'Graceland'" (January 2019) to be somewhat self-righteous. For Collum to criticize Simon for working with native musical artists such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo, contrary to a political boycott, seems to imply that Simon

For our civilization to survive, we must begin awakening awe, wonder, and spiritual awareness in our daily lives.

and Ladysmith Black Mambazo were supporters of apartheid. "Graceland" came out over 30 years ago, and Collum's article is too little, too late.

David E. Dax
Lexington, Virginia

New Christmas Tradition

I'm writing to say thank you for Jonathan Rowe's poem, "Testimony of the Holy Manger," in the January 2019 issue. Anyone who grew up on or near a farm can relate to the words in this image-making poem. Jonathan's skill of transformation is wonderful: Thank you, Jonathan. This poem is a keeper and will be read in my family every Christmas!

Craig Kelso
Boulder City, Nevada

An Open Table

In his article "Prophetic Vexation" (December 2018) about politeness resulting in abiding injustice, David Dark crosses a line by suggesting it is appropriate "to refuse service to a press secretary in a restaurant." A restaurant is a public accommodation. If refusing such service is proper because of a person's political beliefs and actions, then it follows that it's okay for anyone else to

do the same to anyone whose beliefs and actions they disapprove of. Being properly prophetic is one thing but being discriminatory is another. We're supposed to show the face of Jesus. I have no doubt that Jesus has some words in mind for Sarah Sanders, but I also believe he would not refuse her dinner.

Gerald Alan Ney
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I Want to Repent

Thank you to Lisa Sharon Harper for her views about supporting Donald Trump in her December 2018 article, "An Open Letter to White Evangelicals." While I am an 84-year-old white evangelical, I have not been proud of my brothers and sisters in the faith. Harper points out how supporting Trump's policies often contradicts Christianity. While I do not support such policies, I want to repent for my fellow white evangelicals.

Dick Daudert
Kalamazoo, Michigan

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LOUISVILLE
SEMINARY

BY JIM WALLIS

Deadly Alliances



THE TRUMP administration, members of Congress, and many media pundits often speak and act as if the United States must choose between acting in its own interest and respecting deeper moral values. That's a false choice.

Events on the world stage in recent months have offered abundant reminders that the United States' cozy and corrupt relationship with Saudi Arabia and its tyrannical royal family is a bipartisan moral failure with real costs in human lives. In the name of perceived national interests, the U.S. has long engaged in an amoral realpolitik throughout the world, especially regarding the Middle East. In 2019, this includes Trump's defiant support for Saudi Arabia, despite rising dissension in his own political party.

In recent months, some in Congress and throughout civil society are more openly questioning

alliance has come under strain is the horrific murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October. Intelligence assessments have concluded that Khashoggi's murder was directed by the Saudi regime, almost certainly with the direct knowledge of Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Shamefully, the Trump administration has repeatedly cast doubt on its own intelligence community's assessment of bin Salman's complicity and explicitly made the cynical argument that the U.S.-Saudi alliance—including the ongoing U.S. support for the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen—is too valuable to jeopardize over Khashoggi's murder.

PERHAPS THE MOST often cited justification for the U.S. alliance with Saudi Arabia is U.S. reliance on Saudi oil. This has long been a misguided argument on moral grounds—the idea that we should look the other way on grave moral transgressions by other countries if they produce consumer goods to feed America's materialist appetites is as bogus regarding Saudi Arabia as it is in the U.S.-China relationship. It's also an outdated argument, as the U.S. imports only 9 percent of its oil from Saudi Arabia, an amount that has declined significantly since its peak in 2003.

The more persuasive explanation for U.S. reluctance to distance itself from Saudi Arabia is the U.S. desire for a strong ally in the region to provide a check on Iran's power. Again, this is a misbegotten argument and always has been.

Throughout history, the U.S. has backed brutal and repressive regimes for various reasons, from convenient locations for military bases and access to natural resources such as oil to the desire to counter the influence of the Soviet Union or other geopolitical foes. But in almost every case, the

U.S. has faced real repercussions for choosing allies based on expedience rather than a shared commitment to moral values.

One painful example is Iran, where U.S. support for the shah's brutal regime from the 1940s through the 1970s, done for similar amoral reasons, created the anti-American sentiment that boiled over in the hostage crisis during the Iranian revolution, a sentiment we are still reckoning with today. The U.S. desire to contain Iran since 1979 led to the U.S. support for Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and support for Saudi Arabia that continues today. Supporting Saddam backfired when he invaded Kuwait, and the bases the U.S. established in Saudi Arabia during Desert Storm inflamed anti-American sentiment in Saudi Arabia, which helped Osama bin Laden recruit for al Qaeda and carry out 9/11. Actions have consequences.

The examples are nearly endless, and the point is this: When the United States makes immoral choices to support oppressive regimes and factions, often based on corporate interests, there is nearly always a heavy and long-lasting price to pay, sooner or later. Will we ever learn that the costs to our country and to its soul are simply not worth paying?

THE HORROR OF the entirely human-created starvation in Yemen and the brutality with which the Saudi regime punishes dissent should spur long overdue soul-searching by our elected leaders, in both the executive and legislative branches.

For Christians and other people of moral conscience, some values are not negotiable; choices based on greedy corporate interests or other unethical motives often have dire repercussions, at home and abroad. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

The cozy relationship with Saudi Arabia and its tyrannical royal family is a bipartisan moral failure.

the U.S. relationship with the Saudi Arabian leadership, for two major reasons.

The first is the four-year-old military campaign in Yemen led by Saudi Arabia and materially supported by the U.S. that has created the world's worst ongoing humanitarian crisis. By November, the war had caused—by Save the Children's estimate—85,000 Yemeni children to starve to death. Sufficient food is arriving to Yemen, but the economic devastation caused by the Saudi-led campaign makes it impossible for many parents to buy enough food to feed their children, and conditions on the ground make distributing emergency food aid extremely difficult.

The second reason the U.S.-Saudi



By Diana Butler Bass

Why I Don't Fear Schisms

Denominations may split over sexuality, as they did over slavery, but the U.S. is very different than it was 175 years ago.

IN THE DECADES before the Civil War, three of the nation's largest Protestant denominations—Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists—split over slavery, biblical interpretation, and abolition. Historians have long claimed that these denominational schisms paved the way for a national rift. Once these Protestant churches failed to hold together, breaking into regional bodies of South and North, wrote C.C. Goen in *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*, “a major bond of national unity” dissolved and hastened America’s warring fate.

As the churches divided over slavery then, so they are dividing over sexuality and gender now. Many of the biblical arguments and hermeneutic approaches once used to support slavery are now employed to reject the humanity, gifts, and dignity of women and LGBTQ persons. If you read 19th century sermons or tracts from Southern Presbyterians, for example, you only need to swap out a few words and you have a blog about how the Bible doesn’t allow women to preach or gay and

lesbian couples to marry. Mark Twain once quipped that history doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme. In this case, however, the similarities are so striking that history appears to plagiarize itself.

In recent years, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Presbyterians have all faced contentious splits over these issues, and now the United Methodist Church—the largest mainline Protestant denomination—is struggling with the same.

History may plagiarize, but it will not repeat. These denominations aren’t as significant as they once were, culturally or politically. The Baptists not only split over slavery but remained permanently divided in Northern and Southern branches, then divided and divided again. The Methodists reunited in the 20th century, as did the Presbyterians. But for all their remarkable contributions, neither denomination regained its former status.

In the 19th century, the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians were more than denominations—they were

culture-making institutions. Their churches were the largest. They influenced the media through sermons and publishing houses. They sponsored almost all college and graduate education. Church arguments were political arguments and vice versa. When these major denominations failed to maintain unity during the crisis over slavery, it was, indeed, a sign of inevitable political collapse.

This history still haunts contemporary church leaders—but it’s time to hear some difficult truths.

First, no denomination—not even the mighty Southern Baptist Convention—is a culture-making institution. None. Almost all are losing members and influence and occupy a more marginal social space than they once did. The people who care about denominational politics are mainly people in the denomination. The media only cares about big, ugly church fights because church fights still sell. They make religion look bad and reinforce the idea that church people are narrow-minded, bigoted, and self-righteous. Church bodies need to make

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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choices knowing that we live in a pluralistic nation, religion doesn't have the cultural sway it once did, and working from the margins isn't a bad thing.

Second, sometimes unity is worse than splitting. In the 19th century, unity came at a huge price: a failure to address the most pressing political issues of the day. Sure, the Episcopal Church never split (at least until the war began), but it also never addressed its complicity in slavery as the church of the planter class in the American South. To their credit, Episcopalians learned from experience and tackled LGBTQ ordination nearly 20 years ago. The denomination suffered schism because of it. In one century, the Episcopal Church maintained unity at a high cost; in the next, it found that parting ways over an intractable theological issue released creativity that made risk-taking for the gospel easier.

The historical lesson that emerges is surprising. Denominational battles won't lead to a national sundering. I doubt they'll even add to our already present political divides. Theological arguments don't have the sweeping cultural power they once did,

nor is the Bible central to the way that most people make partisan decisions. The U.S. is a very different place than it was 175 years ago. Denominations are one more group of traditional institutions under stress in a changing world.

Right now, churches aren't making decisions that will matter to the American future, but they *are* making decisions that will affect the future of millions of Americans. If the nation's denominations split over sexuality or gender, it won't mean much to our *political* life—but if churches split for the sake of loving our neighbors and practicing grace, hospitality, and mercy in ways that speak with power to those who have been betrayed, shamed, and marginalized, then they will be on a path into a life-giving future.

Faith is just that—faith. We can't predict what will happen, not even if we know history well. Faith is always an unexpected journey. This isn't the time to be afraid. ■

Diana Butler Bass, author of Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks, specializes in American religion and culture.

By Kathryn Post

Religious Freedom ... for All

It's never been only a right-wing loophole for evading civil rights laws.

SINCE HOBBY LOBBY won its landmark case in 2014, the religious freedom narrative has been dominated by traditionalist, politically conservative Christians. But for most of our nation's history, religious freedom was a bipartisan value that echoed a commitment to inclusive pluralism.

In 1993 and 2000, religious freedom laws were passed almost unanimously in Congress, with support from social progressives as well as conservatives. Religious freedom was viewed as a basic constitutional right that should be applied indiscriminately.

The 2016 election only exacerbated the perception of religious freedom as a conservative Christian value. President Trump vocally supported Jack Phillips, the baker of the Masterpiece Cakeshop case who refused to bake for a gay couple's wedding because of his religious beliefs. Trump took steps to

dismantle the Johnson Amendment, which protects nonprofits from partisan political manipulation and, with the signing of the first of his two executive orders on religious freedom, announced, "We are giving our churches their voices back."

In some cases, conservatives are claiming their right to religious freedom in entirely appropriate ways. Yet, in too many cases, far-right Christians have used religious freedom as a loophole for discrimination or to evade civil rights laws. And secular progressives have allowed them to do it, ceding religious liberty to extremists and jeopardizing this core tenet of democracy.

But that narrative could be changing.

Diverse and surprising religious freedom cases are popping up around the country and may signal a rebalancing. In February 2017, for instance, the Standing Rock Sioux tribe sued the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

From the Archives

March 2004

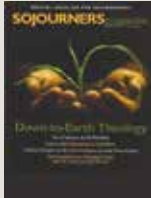
Consider the Turtles

PEOPLE WHO are sensitive to creation know that creation is in constant flux. Continents drift, climates change, magnetic poles flip-flop, and bogs gradually give way to wet meadows and then various kinds of forests. There's a natural succession out here under the sun, and I think there's a kind of natural succession going on theologically for many Christians as well. ...

First, increased concern for the poor and oppressed leads to increased concern for all of creation. The same forces that hurt widows and orphans, minorities and women, children and the elderly also hurt the songbirds and trout, the ferns and old growth forests: greed, impatience, selfishness, arrogance, hurry, anger, competition, irreverence—plus a spirituality that cares for souls but neglects bodies, that prepares for eternity in heaven but abandons history on earth. ...

Second, the eschatology of abandonment is being replaced by an engaging gospel of the kingdom. ... In this kingdom, Jesus said, sparrows matter. Lilies of the field matter. Yes, people matter even more, but it's not a matter of either/or; it's a matter of degree in a world where everything that is good matters—where everything God made matters. God sent Jesus into the world with a saving love, and Jesus sends us with a similar saving love—love for the ... poor and forgotten to be sure, but also for the little creatures who suffer from the same selfish greed and arrogance that oppress vulnerable humans. ■

Brian McLaren was pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Maryland when this article appeared.



to stop the Dakota Access pipeline from endangering Lake Oahe, whose waters are used in Native religious ceremonies.

Seven Catholic peacemakers face federal charges of trespass, conspiracy, and depredation of property for unauthorized entry onto a Georgia naval base in April to “symbolically dismantle” nuclear warheads on the Trident-class submarines at Kings Bay, with possible sentences of up to 25 years. The defendants argue that Catholic teaching demands dismantling nuclear weapons and that, as a matter of religious freedom, the government must offer the least restrictive means of resolving the charges against them.

In January 2018, Border Patrol agents witnessed Scott Warren, a member of No More Deaths humanitarian aid group, providing shelter, beds, clothes, food, and water to two migrants on the outskirts of a small Arizona town, about 40 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border. The agents arrested Warren and brought federal charges against him for harboring migrants illegally and for conspiring to do so. He pled not guilty and offered religious freedom as his defense.

By Fran Quigley

A Different Kind of Faith Healing

A Baptist pastor developed Canada's single-payer system.

THANKS TO CANADA'S universal health-care system, most Canadians have never had to worry about paying medical bills. Everyone gets the care they need, at a cost far below the hit-or-miss U.S. health-care system. It's little wonder that 94 percent of Canadians boast proudly about their national health care—even more than they hoot about hockey.

Tommy Douglas, the architect of the Canadian single-payer system, rolled out the plan while serving as a five-term premier of Saskatchewan. But Douglas' drive to ensure health care for all didn't originate from his politics. It was developed from his faith and his pre-political life as a Baptist minister.

In 1930, when Douglas became pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, he joined an agricultural community brutally impacted by drought and economic depression. At first, Douglas focused on intensive relief efforts. Soon he

The Catholic diocese of Brownsville, Texas, is fighting to prevent the federal government from seizing church land at La Lomita Chapel to build the border wall. “Such a structure would limit the freedom of the church to exercise her mission in the Rio Grande Valley,” said Bishop Daniel Flores.

House Democrats recently voiced support for the first Muslim women to ever be elected to Congress by proposing an alteration to the historic rule against members wearing hats during sessions. The proposed change would “ensure religious expression” by “clarify[ing] in the rules that religious headwear is permitted to be worn in the House Chamber.”

No matter where one falls along the religious or political spectrum, religious freedom remains an essential component of a functioning democracy. By supporting a justice-minded vision of religious freedom, we can ensure that religious beliefs and civil rights are protected for all. ■

Kathryn Post is an editorial assistant of Sojourners.

embraced advocacy as well.

As Douglas put it, “You're never going to step out of the front door into the kingdom of God. What you're going to do is slowly and painfully change society until it has more of the values that emanate from the teachings of Jesus or from other great religious leaders.”

To Douglas, universal health care was an essential part of such godly change. “How do you talk to a [person] about saving his soul if he's got a toothache?” he asked. “Or worse, if he's got a child that needs medical care and can't get it?”

He successfully campaigned for a universal care system in Saskatchewan. The success of the provincial model led to the 1968 implementation of a “universal, compulsory, tax-financed health insurance program on a national scale,” as described by Joe Gunn in his essay “Charter and Covenant: The

Churches and the Struggle for Public Health Care in Canada.”

The faith community helped push the universal-care system to victory. “The history of church involvement in health care is a history of which Canadians can be proud, and build upon,” wrote Gunn. “The churches have not been afraid to enter the political fray around health policy.”

Some faith groups, especially the Catholic Hospital Association, initially doubted the wisdom of a national Canadian insurance system. But the plan

“Next you’ll be proposing ‘grocerycare.’”

was embraced by an ecumenical majority that vigorously pushed for its adoption, overcoming fierce opposition from physician groups and the insurance industry. As one politician complained, “Next you’ll be proposing ‘grocerycare.’”

But people of faith insisted that universal health care was a moral imperative. The Canadian section of the Lutheran Church in America wrote at the time, “Through its emphasis on the stewardship of God’s resources for a man’s [sic] own family and for his neighbor, there is implicit the importance of individual responsibility for the health of others ... In an urban industrial society individual responsibility by itself is insufficient. We are very much interdependent. Therefore, Christian concern involves a great deal more than the responsibility for one’s own health and personal concern for the sick and dying. ... When it becomes concerned with justice it ought to see health as a fundamental human right.”

Since the adoption of Canada’s Medicare system, the Ecumenical Health Care Network continues to defend access to care, resist privatization, and push for expansion into prescription drug coverage and home care. People of faith in Canada take these actions in the spirit of Tommy Douglas, the Baptist minister-turned-politician who pioneered their program. ■

Fran Quigley is director of the Health and Human Right Clinic at Indiana University McKinney School of Law and editor of Faith in Healthcare, a free weekly email newsletter.

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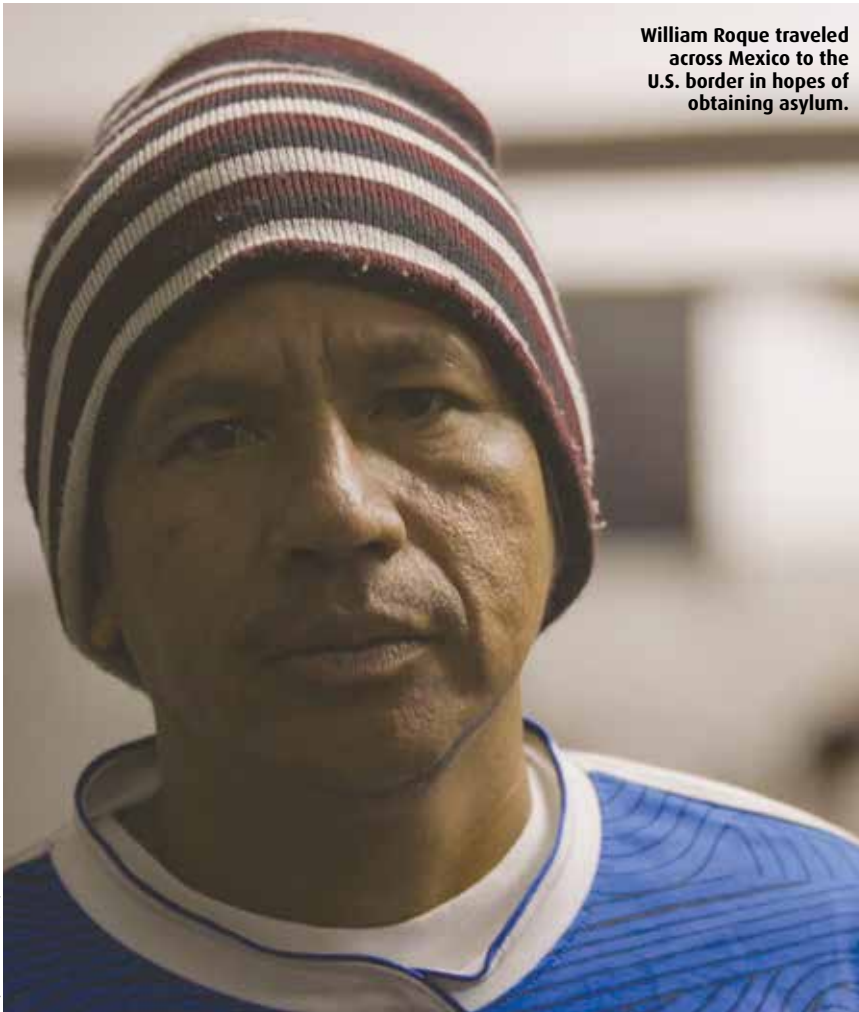


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VIDEOS



William Roque traveled across Mexico to the U.S. border in hopes of obtaining asylum.

Kayla Lattimore/Sojourners

'It's Not a Sin'

La Casa del Peregrino is a Catholic shelter in Mexico City that provides food, water, and other basic needs to people—including William Roque—traveling across Mexico to the U.S. border. "To all the other countries: Don't criticize immigrants," Roque told Sojourners at the shelter. "It's not a sin or a crime, but it's a way to get a normal life. Because we're looking not to be rich or millionaires but [for] an opportunity to live a little bit better and have a better future for our children." Watch the video at sojo.net/videos.

NEWS



Adam Ward

AL.com

Do Not Touch

The day before Adam Ward was slated to be executed, he sat in a visitation booth at the Allan B. Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas, with Rev. DeAnna Golsan, a woman he had never met before," reported *Sojourners'* Will Young.

"During the months prior, the two—Golsan, a Texan pastor who believed in the merit and morality of the death penalty, and Ward, a man who was sentenced to death—had become unexpected pen pals after being connected by Ward's mother, an attendee of Golsan's church. ... The initial visit lasted an hour and a half, at the end of which Ward told Golsan that he wanted to hold hands with someone if he was to be lethally injected the next day. Golsan, without hesitating, said yes."

Yet Ward's request "was denied with no appeal," wrote Young. "Golsan was told it would be a potential safety risk, as described in no-contact policies set by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice that bar any form of physical touch between death row inmates and their visitors. 'Surely you understand that we cannot risk security just to give someone comfort,' said an official at the unit."

Later, Ward's mother asked Golsan through sobs if this was God's will. "Golsan, not quite knowing herself, responded with a quiet 'no.'"

Read more at sojo.net/young.

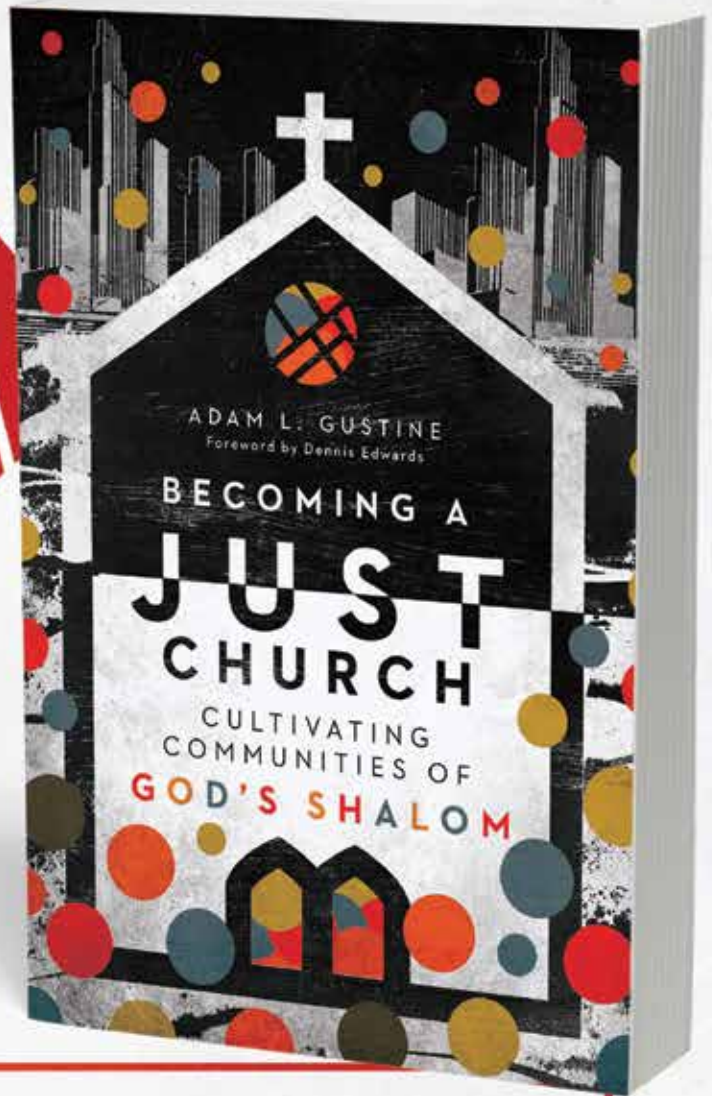
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“By standing with transgender Americans, we send out a message that there is no ‘other’ to fear.”

— Rev. Sharon Risher
on gun violence and hate crimes
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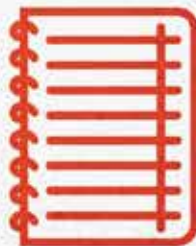


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To Be Black and Christian in Brazil

MORE THAN 50 black women and a handful of black men huddled in a narrow room of an unmarked church on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. The women were adorned with natural hair and were happy to be together, but I noticed a seriousness about them. Many had traveled two hours or more via public transportation. This was not just a meeting; It was an event.

Our gathering formed in the shadow of Brazil's recent election. Jair Bolsonaro won the Brazilian presidency, promising to target black women activists, LGBTQ people, and others and to bring in militarized security forces to squash violence in shantytown communities known as favelas. Seventy percent of evangelical Christians voted for Bolsonaro, giving him his win.

At our meeting, worship leaders led the women in singing songs about the God who promises a day when oppression will be lifted. One

Black women in Brazil are on their way to fulfilling Marielle Franco's call for them to bring justice to their nation.

of the songs honored the brown, colonized girl named Maria, whose Magnificat promised these women's liberation.

A year has passed since the assassination of 38-year-old black Rio de Janeiro councilwoman Marielle Franco. Franco, who challenged police brutality and extrajudicial killings, was shot while riding in the back seat of a car. Two hours before she was slain, she called for black women to engage in politics to bring about a just Brazil. The bullets that killed her were purchased in 2006 by federal police in the nation's capital city of Brasilia.

Brazil's Carnival has presented



Slain Brazilian civil rights leader Marielle Franco

UOI Noticias

the country as a happy, diverse nation where black women can dance without shame or consequence. I didn't know Brazil was the last nation in the world to abolish slavery and that 4.8 million Africans were shipped there over a span of nearly 400 years. I also didn't know that after abolition in Brazil, the Portuguese elite begged Europeans to "whiten" their mostly African nation and "civilize" it. They promised 4 million Europeans seeds and free transportation to Brazil, while formerly enslaved Africans received nothing.

So the Africans traveled to the hills and formed favelas. Governed by gangs, with poor public education and few public services, the favelas remain the poorest and most violent communities in Brazil. The Brazilian government reported that in 2015 a case of gender-based violence occurred in their country every seven minutes.

To be black and Christian in Brazil brought with it the adoption of European views of blackness as negative.

And being part of the black resistance has largely required rejection of Christianity and the embrace of traditional African religions. It's for this reason that the Brazilian, Jesus-following women of African descent at our gathering—several of whom had organized with Marielle Franco—leaned forward as I spoke to them of how God gave all of humanity inherent dignity and the divine call to steward the world.

One older woman came forward in the closing minutes of our gathering (which ran over by an hour). Through tears, she said, "I am overwhelmed: I didn't know. Thank you."

Black women in Brazil are on their way to fulfilling Marielle Franco's call for them to bring justice to their nation. I don't know when exactly it will arrive, but when black women look white supremacy in its face and say a resolute "No," it tends to be the beginning of white supremacy's unraveling. Thank God.

And thank you, Marielle. ■

Lisa Sharon Harper, author of The Very Good Gospel, is founder and president of FreedomRoad.us.



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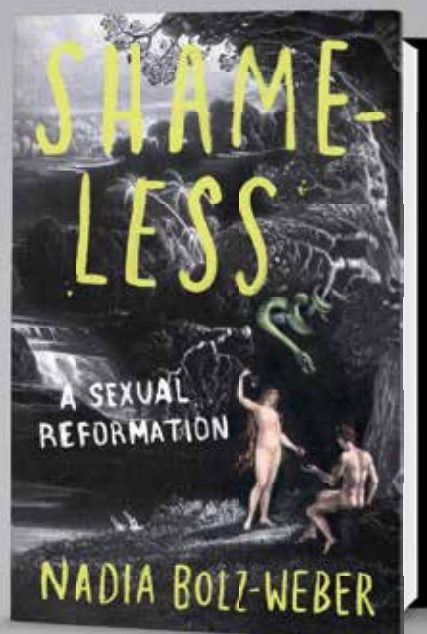
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**How right-wing billionaires are attempting
a hostile takeover of the U.S. Catholic Church.**

by **TOM ROBERTS**

THE RISE OF THE Catholic Right



Timothy Busch is a wealthy man with big ambitions.

His version of the prosperity gospel, Catholic in content and on steroids, is a hybrid of traditionalist pieties wrapped in American-style excess and positioned most conspicuously in service of free market capitalism.

Busch's organization, the Napa Institute, and its corresponding foundation are among the most prominent of a growing number of right-wing Catholic nonprofits with political motivations. Such groups, some more extreme than others and all on the right to far-right side of the political and ecclesial spectrum, have in recent years muscled in on territory that previously was the largely unchallenged domain of the nation's powerful Catholic bishops.



Photo composite/Reuters



Napa
Institute
logo

What Busch calls “in-your-face Catholicism” is often expressed amid multicourse meals followed by wine and cigar receptions, private cocktail parties for the especially privileged, traditional Catholic devotionals, Mass said in Latin for those so inclined, “patriotic rosary” sessions that include readings from George Washington and Robert E. Lee, and the occasional break for a round of golf.

Busch’s Catholic Right brand of American libertarianism aligns with some far-right leaders based in Italy who oppose Pope Francis and appear interested in joining forces to fashion an alternative to official Catholic leadership structures, which in this country means the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

Last summer, the Napa Institute sponsored a birthday soiree at the Rome residence of Cardinal James Harvey, a far-right American cleric. There, Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis, a German philanthropist-turned-conservative Catholic, rubbed shoulders with American arch-traditionalist Cardinal Raymond Burke, who, according to *The New York Times*, “ate birthday cake in the shape of a red cardinal’s hat, held champagne in one glass and blessed seminarians with the other, and watched fireworks light up the sky in his honor.”

Princess Gloria also introduced German Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, fired by Pope Francis from his position as the church’s doctrinal watchdog, to Steve Bannon. Bannon subsequently invited Müller to Bannon’s Washington headquarters, better known as the “Breitbart Embassy,” according to *The Times*. All done under the watchful eye of Timothy Busch.

Napa Institute founder Timothy Busch. Below, from left, Catholic University of America president John Garvey; Andrew Abela, founding dean of CUA’s Busch School of Business and Economics; and Steph Busch.



Reuters

Vatican photo/Wikimedia Commons

Orange County Register/Eugene Garcia/Napa Institute

corrupting influences since Judas Iscariot accepted the 30 pieces of silver.



Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis introduced Cardinal Gerhard Müller, below, to Trump adviser Steve Bannon.



Cardinal Raymond Burke said it is "licit" to call for Pope Francis' resignation.



CNS/Paul Haring

Money, politics, and religion

Paralleling the ascendancy of the Religious Right out of 1980s evangelicalism, today's Catholic Right is rising and well-financed. While pendulum swings are common between conservative and progressive tendencies in Catholicism, the 35-year traditionalist reign of popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI allowed the Far Right to flourish. In the United States, Catholics constitute the largest and most organized Christian denomination and include Catholic parishes, schools and universities, and hospitals.

Busch offers one of the best examples of how money and a political agenda can shape religious teaching—particularly using the 501(c)(3) tax status, the portion of the IRS code that exempts charitable nonprofit organizations from paying federal taxes.

The Napa Institute's high-end evangelism takes place at venues such as Busch's Meritage Resort and Spa in Napa Valley and in high-profile spots such as the Trump International Hotel in Washington. His events never lack for a smattering of red and purple zucchetos, the skull caps worn by bishops and cardinals, lending the proceedings a certain credibility and legitimacy.

'Authorities above the authorities'

The Napa Institute—with its mission, according to its tax forms, to "equip Catholic

leaders to defend and advance the Catholic faith in the 'next America'"—is one of several Catholic nonprofits that have become forceful players within the church and at the intersection of religion and politics, and one of the most active. Some groups are aggressively involved in aligning Catholic thought with libertarian economic theory while others are devoted to defining Catholicism for the culture by exceptionally conservative theology and practice.

For Christianity, money and power have been corrupting influences since Judas Iscariot accepted the silver in exchange for a betrayal. In Roman Catholicism, from the times of the Medicis and Borgias up to more recent scandals—such as when the Legionaries of Christ used large sums of money to buy influence (and a temporary



Legatus and Domino's Pizza founder Thomas Monaghan

buffer from scrutiny) in the Vatican—the mix has produced high art, toxic papacies, and distortions of the gospel and of church teaching.

In the United States today, influence is not peddled through royal families and palace intrigues, but often through a peculiarly American construct—the nonprofit sector, which has exploded in recent decades with a particular emphasis on politics. Traditional

groups such as the Knights of Columbus continue to make substantial charitable contributions, but its capacity for funding has given the Knights an inordinately loud voice, unmatched by other lay groups. It has millions to send to dioceses in need, or to clean the façade of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome—or for other purposes.

With that kind of financial power, no one in the hierarchy is likely to object when the Knights appropriate funds for politically conservative think tanks, news agencies, and even the Federalist Society, an organization that advocates for conservative justices, with no connection to anything religious or charitable. Nor did any bishops question a communiqué supporting Judge Brett Kavanaugh for a seat on the Supreme Court.

Newer groups—including the Napa Institute, Legatus (launched by Domino's Pizza founder Thomas Monaghan), and the Acton Institute—use the nonprofit designation to push an extreme libertarian economic agenda. Their devotion to individualism, unrestricted capitalism, and diminishment of government services, especially to the poor and marginalized, runs counter to the central tenets of Catholic social teaching.

"I think we're in a kind of brave new world where these groups really are setting themselves up as authorities above the authorities," said Stephen Schneck, former director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America (and a



The Busch-endowed business school at CUA promotes “virtues-based free enterprise.”

Cardinal James Harvey hosted a Napa Institute soiree at his residence in Rome.

Sojourners board member). “I don’t know how else to say that. They’re challenging the legitimacy of existing structures of authority and trying to fill that space with their own agenda and their own people.”

Schneck sees the explosion of religious nonprofits not so much as a cultural phenomenon but rather “as something that leaked over from American politics,” where a flood of money influencing the direction of the two major parties is coming through groups that have little allegiance to traditional party structures or traditionally held positions and alliances.

The decline of the bishops

The eruption of independent groups may not have been that surprising in the Protestant world where evangelical leaders and their movements, taking up issues on the margins of society and church, often exercised a degree of suspicion about mainline denominations.

In the rigidly hierarchical Catholic world, on the other hand, dissent was often smothered beneath the rubric of Catholic unity. Since its founding in 1917 (as the National Catholic War Council) to ensure Catholic support for World War I, the U.S. Catholic bishops’ conference has been one of the most powerful religious organizations in the country. Until recently, the Catholic clerical culture, particularly at the bishops’ level, was able to present a united and authoritative front when speaking on social and political issues.

The phenomenon of independent organizations challenging the established Catholic authority emerged in the 1980s, just as the U.S. bishops were at the apex of their power as a teaching body, addressing



major issues of the day. In 1983, the bishops released a far-reaching pastoral on modern warfare, the result of broad consultation with lay experts. They followed in 1986 with a pastoral letter titled “Economic Justice for All,” a document anchored in a century of Catholic social teaching and highly critical of President Ronald Reagan’s economic policies—and completely unwelcome to the 1980 vice-presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party, David H. Koch.

The ascendancy of the Catholic Right, Schneck said, is rooted in the bishops’ letter on economics. Countering the pastoral letter, he said, marked “the beginning of the conservative efforts to create their own magisterium [teaching authority] on the side.”

Well before the pastoral letter was published, Michael Novak, a leading conservative Catholic scholar with the American Enterprise Institute, another nonprofit that has become an influential voice in the religion conversation, and William E. Simon, treasury secretary under Richard Nixon, began attacking the document and its support for government policies that aid the poor. Novak and Simon presented an 80-page rebuttal arguing that church teaching supported free enterprise. The paper appeared before the first draft of the pastoral was even released.

The USCCB’s diminished role is due in part, said Schneck, to a “tremendous turnover of staff in recent decades” that “undercut the organization’s ability to do staff-level work. And frankly, for all sorts of reasons, some of the bishops themselves are less supportive of the USCCB’s public and

Reuters

"have access to capital that the church doesn't." —Timothy Busch



Billionaire Charles Koch at a Catholic University seminar on his book *Good Profit*.

policy applications ... the role the USCCB might play in American public life and politics has been dramatically pulled in for all sorts of reasons."

Among those reasons was a document by Pope John Paul II in 1998 that dramatically reduced the authority of national bishops' conferences and their ability to address major social issues. John Paul's appointments to the episcopacy also tended to be men less inclined to take on cultural issues other than abortion and, more recently, gay marriage and religious liberty. Another reason for the diminished role of the U.S. conference these days is the bishops' preoccupation with a disaster of their own making, the clergy sex abuse crisis.

'Evangelization' through access to capital

The nonprofit sector has accommodated far more than charitable instincts in this country, said Schneck, "where we have all of these groups basically allied on one



side or another, using faith issues for their political purposes." Peter Dobkin Hall, in his 1992 collection of essays *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, noted that the number of nonprofits grew from 12,500 in 1940 to more than 700,000 in the early 1990s. According to the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics, nonprofits now number more than 1.5 million and "include everything from neighborhood associations that meet a couple of times a

outsized clout. Busch aims to affect church institutions and to shape the Catholic narrative for the wider culture by gaining influence on universities and media corporations.

In October 2017, the Napa Institute sponsored an event at Catholic University titled "Good Profit," in homage to Charles Koch's book of the same name. Busch donated \$15 million to Catholic U., and the business school there is now named after him.

At the event, Busch said that "Catholic NGOs" (non-governmental organizations) are at the heart of the Catholic Church's mission today. "The evangelization of our country is being done by private foundations, Catholic NGOs, like Napa and Legatus," Busch said. Catholic nonprofits, he said,

remain "tethered to the church through a bishop ... But they have access to capital that the church doesn't."

Knights of Columbus: Follow the money

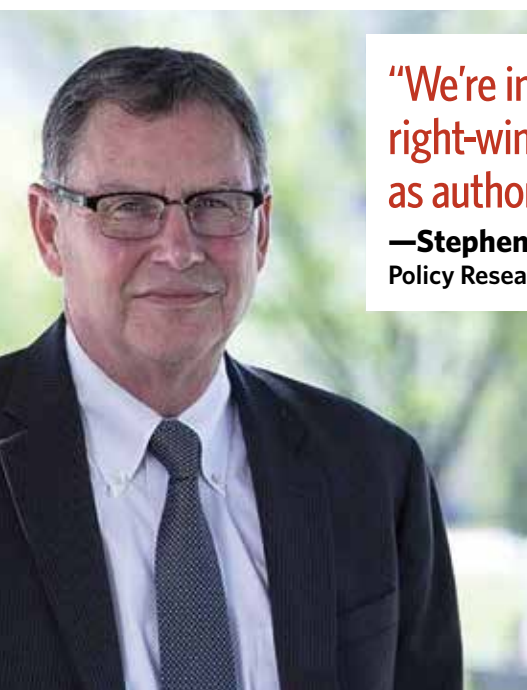
One of the leading funders of both church activities and the new Catholic Right groups is an organization that is as establishment

"We're in a brave new world where these right-wing groups are setting themselves up as authorities above the authorities."

—Stephen Schneck, former director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at CUA

year and have no assets to large universities and foundations with billions of dollars in assets" and everything in between, from labor unions to community music organizations to an increasing number involved in the culture wars of the current age.

Money is the fuel that provides certain voices with what some might consider



CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn

Busch School of Business

In a bizarre turn, we now have Catholic groups

Karen Callaway/Catholic New World

as they come: The Knights of Columbus. Founded as a fraternal benefits organization in the mid-19th century to help Irish immigrants, it has grown into an insurance company for members, with \$2.2 billion in reported revenue in 2015, as I reported in *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR). It spends tens of millions of dollars on charity and in aid to the church and has given millions to the Vatican for everything from maintenance of buildings to purchase of communication equipment.

While the influence pedaled by the Napa Institute remains shrouded behind private foundations and multiple family business interests, the Knights of Columbus' money trail has become more accessible to public scrutiny.

The organization is currently led by Supreme Knight Carl Anderson, a former political operative who began his career working for the Republican senator Jesse Helms and later worked in the Reagan White House. During his tenure, the Knights has become a funder of politically conservative organizations. In 2014, for instance, it donated \$325,000 to the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which fought the contraception mandate of the Affordable Care Act, even though most Catholic institutions, including the Catholic Health Association, said they could live with accommodations carved out by the Obama administration. It also gave \$330,000 to the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative political think tank



Knights of Columbus Supreme Knight Carl Anderson began his career working for GOP Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina.



that is home base for George Weigel, an influential conservative Catholic writer. The Federalist Society has received several donations of \$50,000. Between 2010 and 2014, according to *NCR*, the Knights spent more than \$1.4 million to sponsor Catholic bishops attending medical ethics workshops that included speakers opposing same-sex marriage and same-sex parenting. Presentations included psychologically discredited claims that people who identify as gay or transgender can be "cured" through counseling and can become heterosexual. The anti-gay training for bishops is coordinated by the National Catholic Bioethics Center, according to a 2014 report in *NCR* by Nicole Sotelo. The center is another organization that receives Knights of Columbus support. In 2014, it received \$250,000; in 2015, \$300,617.

In addition to substantial donations to a number of conservative news outlets, the Knights awarded \$1.5 million to the Alabama-based Catholic media conglomerate EWTN, the Eternal Word Television Network. Busch, too, is a donor to (and board member of) EWTN—a platform that

became useful last summer for releasing a letter attacking Pope Francis.

Attacking Pope Francis

During previous pontificates, Busch was all-in on loyalty to the pope and the teaching authorities of the church. In the era of

Pope Francis, however, he has associated himself with right-wing Catholic efforts to discredit the pope using the largely debunked accusations of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the former papal ambassador to the United States. In one of several letters criticizing the pope, Viganò urged Francis to step down.

The case could be made that Viganò is merely a disgruntled employee striking back at the home office. When Francis visited the United States in 2015, it was Viganò

Right-wing Catholic groups have achieved a prominence that makes them an alternative to the U.S. bishops' conference.

who arranged the awkward surprise meeting between the pope and Kim Davis, a county clerk in Kentucky who refused to sign marriage licenses of same-sex couples. Viganò was later removed from the diplomatic post by Pope Francis, under a cloud of controversy.

But Viganò's complaints—including accusations that Pope Francis ignored warnings about Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who was removed from active ministry in June after numerous allegations of sexual abuse over 50 years—rose above the level of

Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò was removed from a diplomatic post by Pope Francis.

an unhappy bureaucrat. Viganò shared his letter ahead of time with several far-right Catholic leaders, including Busch.

Viganò's letter calling for the pope's resignation was distributed through a subsidiary of EWTN, the largest religious media network in the world with a claimed reach of a quarter-billion households in 140 countries. EWTN, which was launched in the early 1980s by nun-magnate Mother Angelica, who was committed to promoting "traditional social values," also owns the Catholic News Agency and the *National Catholic Register* newspaper, through which Viganò's accusations against the pope were distributed.

Viganò has since moderated his claims, and they have been strongly refuted by Vatican officials, but Busch told *The New York Times* that the archbishop "has done us a great service. He decided to come forward because if he didn't, he realized he would be perpetuating the cover-up." Later, Busch added, "Viganò has given us an agenda. We need to follow those leads and push that forward."

A right-wing phenomenon

Since their emergence in the 1980s, right-wing Catholic groups, with their deep alliances among the bishops themselves, have achieved a prominence that essentially makes them an alternative to the U.S. bishops' conference. Schneck said that it has become "increasingly difficult to identify the line between this conservative Catholic deployment of organizations and the official institutions of the church in America."

In a bizarre turn, we now have Catholic groups accusing the pope of betraying the church and calling for him to resign, as well as initiating what amounts to hate group activity against gays and others in church settings. Money, and the power of

U.S. nonprofits, has given extreme-right Catholics new means of communicating to the wider world what they think the Catholic narrative should be. That generally, but not always, is confined to sexual issues—abortion, gay rights, the rights of divorced and remarried people within the church.

Schneck believes there is a qualitative difference today in the challenge to the structure of Catholic hierarchy than there was in the 1980s. "Then, they were trying to respond to the letter on the economy, but they weren't challenging the authority of the bishops, they weren't challenging the authority of the pope," Schneck said. "They weren't really trying to involve themselves in religion as much as trying to push the church in the direction of being more accommodating to capitalism and free market solutions."

Today, he said, "These groups are increasingly trying to change the church itself."

If the bishops allow the extreme-right groups to continue unchallenged, Schneck said, their influence will only increase, and they'll be able to "claim legitimacy and their own authority in making their pronouncements. Because they have the money and because the church always needs money at every level, the doors will continue to be open to them to interact with the church."

And the money, he said, resides mostly on the right of the ecclesial and political spectrums. He sees nothing of similar ideological heft or funding on the left. "Maybe," he said, "it's because progressives have just given up on the church and aren't willing to contribute a dime to anything that might go toward it." ■

Tom Roberts, author of *Joan Chittister: Her Journey from Certainty to Faith* and *The Emerging Catholic Church*, is executive editor of *National Catholic Reporter*.



Reuters

be still and know

I AM PART of a network of Christians in Philadelphia who come together regularly to practice contemplative prayer. As part of our practice, our group moves into silence with a simple chant of “Be still and know that I am God.” Especially when repeated quietly with gentle breathing, I find in those words a beautiful invitation—to stillness, to knowing, to being.

The phrase comes from the Book of Psalms and can function as a touchstone of living a grounded spiritual life, a common theme for many journeying on the path of contemplation. But I recently had a startling experience of those very words.

Our church, a Mennonite congregation, has an annual Peace and Justice Sunday, connecting our call to discipleship with liturgy and worship. This year one of the texts was Psalm 46, with its many familiar and moving lines and images. What made it appropriate for this service was its evocation of the God of peace responding to the military madness of the nations: ceasing wars, breaking the bow, shattering the spear, burning the chariot—a full-fledged divine disarming of the raging nations.

And then, verse 10: “Be still and know that I am God.”

As familiar as much of that psalm is, never had I seen this startling truth: This divine call to stillness is part of a psalm praising and exalting God for bringing an end to war.

The core of Psalm 46, in fact, conveys an almost mythic violent tumult—raging, tottering, destroying, burning, the earth melting. The futile violence and madness of arrogant imperial militarism—the perverse human compulsion for power and domination—meets its match in God’s holy desolation, whose ultimate end

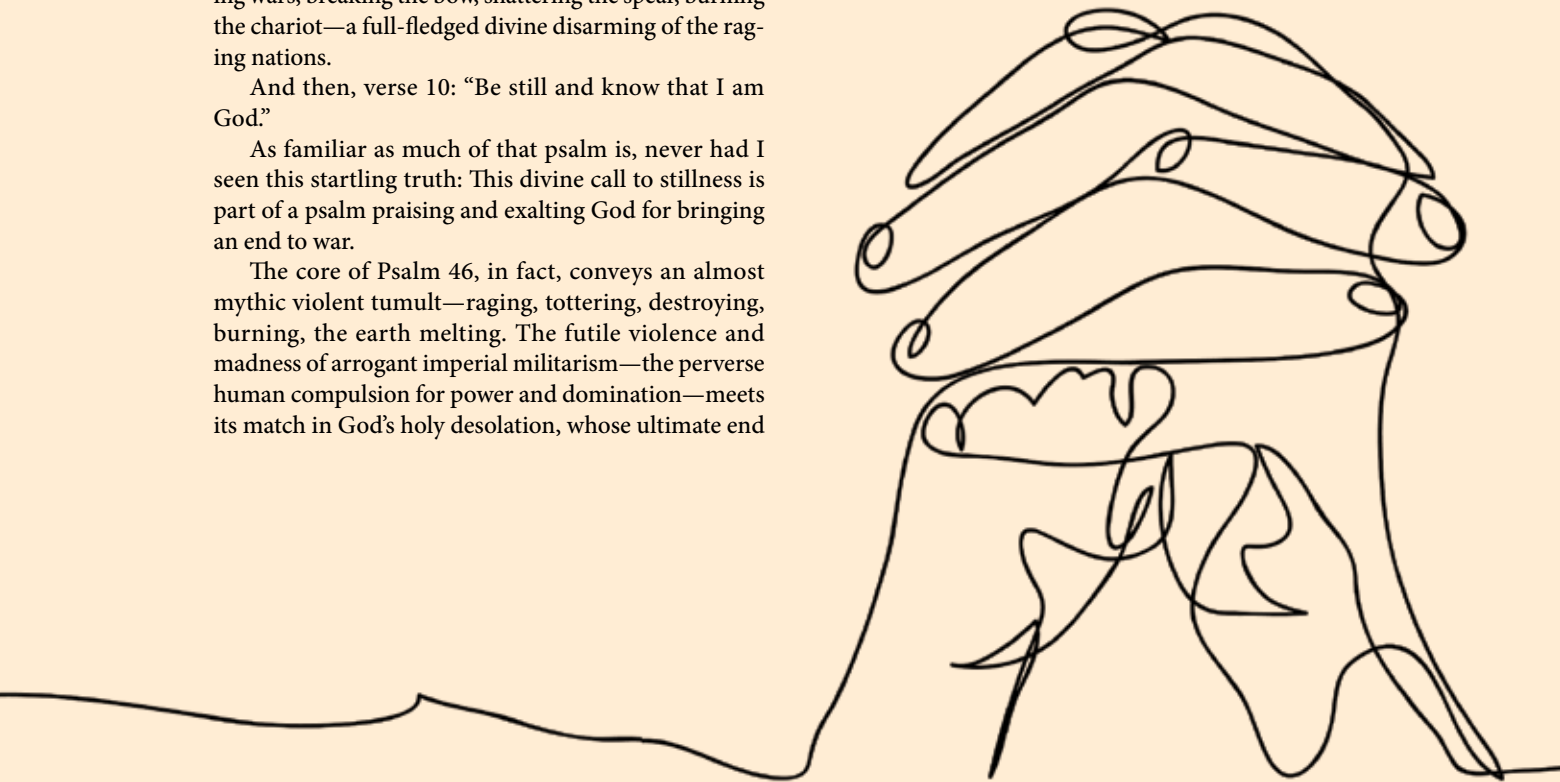
is the ceasing of human violence. Then God asserts that it is God the Creator who deserves glory and exaltation, not the puny and petty human-wrought kingdoms. And then these startling words, addressed to the nations who would seek glory and exultations themselves: “Be still and know that I am God.”

by **WILL O'BRIEN**

A little midrash: “Shut up! Silence your vapid proclamations and paltry propaganda! Cease your craziness and destruction! I am the Mighty One, not you! How dare you claim the glory that is mine alone! I’ll show you who is in charge!” The nations, their tools of power demolished, their supposed might disgraced, are chastened into muted humiliation. But they are also invited to a liberating, healing, and salvific awareness: Know the truth of God. Submit to the true order of creation.

In their original context, these beautiful and compelling words are not addressed to an individual spiritual

Dodomo



**Psalm 46 calls us to quiet our souls.
But it also guides us to engage a tumultuous world.**

seeker. They are not a beckoning to the contemplative path. They are not a portal into mystical silence.

When we gather for centering prayer, are we misusing this text from the psalm? Are we, as the Western church is so apt to do, commandeering a biblical assertion of the shalom and justice of God in the world and defanging it into a tool for individualist piety? Is this a version of the troubling ecclesial tradition of promoting “spiritual practices” at the expense of living out mercy, compassion, justice, and peacemaking in a world of suffering and violence?

It strikes me that the militant nations of the world referenced in this psalm would be more than delighted for God’s people to engage in such misreading and misdirection. If God’s people are busy contemplating in silence, the nations might feel empowered to continue in their violence and plunder with less concern about facing the authentic power of God.

Those are genuine concerns. But the psalms, as with most of scripture, are not confined to one meaning. While we can grossly misinterpret and misuse biblical texts, they can often speak to persons in many ways and at different levels. What is most compelling is the very point of tension between these two readings of Psalm 46. The psalm can be understood as a dual invitation: Each spiritual seeker is invited to a deep knowing of God, and at the same time, the hearers of this exultant psalm are invited to join in the nonviolent power of God in our world and our history.

The contemplative path—all prayer, in fact—is a journey toward knowing God. As people of faith, we are provided with many signposts as we undertake the journey—including God’s self-revelation in the biblical tradition. The God we yearn to know more deeply is the God of Jesus, the God of the prophets, the God of the two testaments—a gracious, loving Creator, a God of shalom and justice, a God who intervenes in our history, who shatters the weapons of war and foils the power of nations and empires.

In this sense, the stillness and knowing of Psalm 46 takes on a more powerful message: The God we seek to know better through our spiritual disciplines is the same God the nations are chastened to know. The peace that passes all understanding, as Paul puts it, is both the peace of our souls resting in our own belovedness and the peace of human communities that have fore-sworn the way of weaponry and oppression.

Within the Christian tradition there is a long-standing tension (or an apparent tension) between action and contemplation. But some of our wisest spiritual voices have urged us to transcend this tension and see rather a powerful spiritual symbiosis. “Be still and know that I am God”—these words contain just such an invitation. It suggests that the way of stillness is also a tutelage in being a peacemaker in the world. Ultimately, it is only by glimpsing and experiencing something of the heart of God that we are fully equipped to be present in the violence of history with an alternative vision of shalom. By spiritually surrendering in contemplation (even our fumbling efforts to do so), we can come to a deeper vision of politics and a new energy for activism.

As I undertake the disciplines of contemplative prayer, the knowing of God that I experience within myself is a knowing of God I want to bring to the world—through relationships, through community, through an engaged discipleship committed to peacemaking and justice-building. That is, if I can be still enough to learn and to know. ■

Will O’Brien lives with his family in the Vine & Fig Tree community in Philadelphia. He coordinates the Alternative Seminary (alternativeseminary.net) and is active on issues of homelessness and poverty.

**The God we seek
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ONE SUNDAY MORNING at a small church in rural North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains, a congregant discovered a snake slithering under the pews. Without interrupting the sermon, he picked up the snake and took it out of the sanctuary. When the service ended, the pastor, Brandon Wrencher, heard about what happened.

He laughed.

"We're not snake handlers—up the street is a Pentecostal church," said Wrencher. "They do not tell you these things in seminary. I did not prepare."

There were a lot of things in Todd, N.C., for which Wrencher was not prepared. The unincorporated community of several hundred people sits about 30 miles from the Virginia state line and 20 from the Tennessee border, just outside the Cherokee National Forest. Todd boasts a couple of churches, a bakery, a closed-down general store, and zero stoplights. Wrencher estimates that half the population is over 50.

Minister of Loneliness

A black pastor tried to break through the isolation in a small Southern town. Would his neighbors reciprocate?

by **MORGAN LEE**

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"There is just the kind of isolation
that goes beyond the desire for
serenity and solace."





Social poverty

When Wrencher, his wife, and their children moved to Todd in 2013, the minister had to install a personal cell phone tower on his property so his family could get service at home. But more significant to Wrencher, who had previously worked at a predominantly African-American church, was the loneliness of his new ministry. That included both his own loneliness as one of the few African Americans in Todd and the widespread loneliness he discovered in the community.

"I knew it was all white. I knew it was rural," said Wrencher. "I knew this church had started this intentional community and was trying to do revitalization work in the community and the church. I didn't know anything beyond that."

Todd's problems quickly hit him. A once-vibrant timber industry was no more. The community was suffering from

hunger and land neglect. But most devastating was what Wrencher called "social poverty."

"There is just the kind of isolation that goes beyond the desire for serenity and solace," said Wrencher, whose ministry also involved leading a local community development organization known as Blackburn House. "Definitely people know each other somewhat, but there are too many examples of folks who are

completely lonely. When problems happen in the community, there is no movement or social fabric already there to address them."

For those already suffering from this isolation, the changing demographics of the area around Todd suggest their situation will only grow more complicated. For years, most northwest North Carolina residents were born and raised there. But today, out-of-towners flock to Todd to take advantage of the area's access to hiking, kayaking, hayrides,

and apple picking. (In 2012, *U.S. News and World Report* named neighboring Boone one of the "10 Best Affordable Mountain Towns for Retirement.") The influx of newcomers—often better educated and better able to take advantage of the cheap real estate prices—have complicated the strong sense of community that Todd and other small towns in the area pride themselves on.

Porch talk

There is "a divide" between lifelong residents and those who have a second home here, said Martha Enzmann, a 20-year resident of Todd and a close friend of Wrencher.

"People who are just coming out tend to reach out to each other and then band together," said Enzmann. "People who have been born and raised here tend to not do that quite as much. They already have their relationships in place. They are a little slower to reach out to newcomers except to invite them to church."

This self-imposed segregation only compounds isolation, especially for older people whose loved ones have moved away, said Wrencher.

"There are too many examples of folks who experience neglect, who are completely alone," he said. One of those was Buck, an elderly white man who often asked how Wrencher and his family were adjusting.

"He would ask me questions like, 'How are they accepting you over there?'" said Wrencher. "I'm sure he was trying to say more than what he was saying, at least that's how I read him. We wouldn't make it an explicitly racial conversation. But I would be honest with him. I would say, 'It's hard for my family and me.'"

Usually Wrencher shied away from opening up about the racial challenges, sharing instead about his financial burdens. During one conversation, Wrencher mentioned he was on his way to the grocery store. Buck told him to follow him off the porch into his house.

When they walked into the kitchen, Buck reached down and grabbed something, recalled Wrencher.

"He handed me \$20," said Wrencher. "This doesn't feel like a big deal, but this is a man no one ever visits. I learned later that his diet consisted of eating saltine crackers and peppermints—so he was malnourished and neglected. He probably rarely saw children besides my son. But there was a kind of bond around our Christian identity ... that was really beautiful."

Congregants told him he "preached too political" or that he got "too angry" around "certain kinds of issues."

Pastor Brandon Wrencher and family in front of their former church in Todd, N.C.

For his part, “Brandon will go out of his way to approach places that other members of the congregation may have avoided,” said Enzmann in 2016. “He attends funerals of someone he might not know, but they live right up the road. He spends a lot of time doing pastoral care and paying attention to people’s needs. It’s very important to him.”

No outlets

But those bonds across generational and cultural divides were scarcer than Wrencher wished. Though he and his family had a handful of allies, they often felt exhausted by the lack of a larger black community who could relate to and empathize with their experience.

“It’s definitely lonely. The good thing is that I have my family, but they are lonely too,” said Wrencher. “It’s lonely simply because of the demographics, but there’s also no institution to turn to, to raise our voices. There’s no black churches. There’s the NAACP—but it’s all white people in it.”

About a year after his arrival in Todd, Wrencher began reaching out to other black people after realizing that others across his and neighboring counties were having similar experiences to those of his family.

“There are no outlets for black cultural expression,” said Wrencher. “There are no hair salons, no barber shops, no places that sell products for black hair. Historically black churches and black salons end up being huge institutions for black support and care.”

In 2014, Wrencher began holding vigils for black people killed by the police. After hosting a follow-up march at Appalachian State University in 2016 to protest the police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, N.C., Wrencher hoped that the group he was helping to form, drawing together black people regionally, might be willing to embrace activism, an area in which he felt gifted. When he spoke with me during this organizing, Wrencher shared excitement about where they might be headed. But as time wore on, he and his wife soon realized that this was not where the group’s energy lay.

“They’re at a place of needing a lot of fellowship and support of one another,” said Wrencher in 2017. “It’s not that they’re not capable of doing the work of dismantling systems of oppression in the community, but they’re weary and lonely and have been taking a lot of blows and dealing with a lot of internalized oppression.”

This realization—that many in the local black



Photo courtesy of Brandon Wrencher



community were on a different page from Wrencher and his wife—was one of several indicators that prompted him to begin to look for different work.

“Certain kinds of issues”

Over the course of his family’s four years in Todd, the number of older congregants dwindled—many passed away, but others left. Wrencher suspected it was because he’s black.

“In our age folks are too polite to talk racist,” said Wrencher. Instead, he noted that many who departed offered “dog whistle” excuses, telling him he “preached too political” or that he got “too angry” around “certain kinds of issues.” He later found out that some attendees held a private meeting where race had explicitly been mentioned as a reason why people were leaving.

At the same time, however, the church also began attracting a number of new congregants, leading to relationships that sustained Wrencher in his work.

“I have thought about what if these new people in the community weren’t coming to the church. Would I have

Several congregants left the church that night and never returned.

had the capacity to still reach out to these homebound members, many of whom I didn’t have a deep relationship with because they weren’t around on a regular basis?” said Wrencher. “And I’m not sure I would have felt comfortable opening up to them around

my own deep wounds related to racial injustice and racial loneliness. I probably would have been averse to reaching out to them.”

Yet even these new relationships could only buoy the family so far. The church hosted a worship service remembering Philando Castile, the Minneapolis man shot in his car by a police officer. A staff member leading the service suggested the church ought to be lamenting African Americans’ hurt and pain, most recently sparked by Castile’s death.

“We can have signs in the mountains saying that ‘The mountains are a little piece of heaven,’ but for our African-American brothers and sisters, this doesn’t feel like heaven right now,” Wrencher recalls him saying.

Several congregants left the church that night and never returned.

While that alone was painful for Wrencher, “the silence that we experienced amongst the community was probably more hurtful than anything else.”

“It really took a year to say with more compassion and empathy, ‘These people who did not have our backs, who did not reciprocate with love and empathy when we opened

up about our own wounds, what was happening with them was that they didn’t know any better.’ It wasn’t a situation of malice or interpersonal racism. They are victims of the racial injustice and separation that exists in our country, especially in rural communities. Unfortunately, we didn’t have a way to have a conversation with them about how they are victims too, that they lived out the negative parts of their victimhood. I hate that. It doesn’t hurt any less, but at least it’s helping to humanize them and have some distant compassion for them.”

Looking back

In 2017, Wrencher and his family relocated to Greensboro, the third most populated city in North Carolina and a two-hour drive from Todd. There, Wrencher has helped launch the Good Neighbor Movement (GNM), “an inclusive, multiethnic, people-of-color-led network of house churches called ‘city villages.’” GNM seeks to be a place where social justice can be practiced consistently and communally and models itself on hush harbors—clandestine communities where enslaved Africans would gather to practice their faith and organize for abolition—and base ecclesial communities, where poor people in Latin America came together to study the Bible, forming the basis of what later became liberation theology.

GNM draws on Wrencher’s proudest accomplishment in Todd: growing their intentional community and engaging the surrounding neighborhood, which in turn catalyzed revitalization of the congregation at large and the local community.

Rural communities are “inherently isolating places” and tough places for anyone to do ministry, said Wrencher. But there are steps to take that can help. Denominations should be familiar with the stories and cultural contexts of rural communities so that they can better match ministers with their environments, Wrencher suggested. Further, churches should look to partner with organizations that will help them build cross-cultural partnerships and relationships.

“We can’t forget that there are people who are lonely, hungry, dying, and aging. We need do whatever it takes to reach out to those folks,” he said. ■

Morgan Lee (@mepaynl) is the host of Christianity Today’s weekly current events podcast, Quick to Listen.



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Battling the Straw Men

THERE ARE SEVERAL good and interesting arguments to be had about climate change: Should we tax carbon? How much? Concentrate on electric cars or on public transit? How best to reduce the factory farming that creates so many emissions? Dealing with this crisis will involve the biggest and most rapid transition in economic history, so it would be strange if there weren't debates about how to proceed.

But one debate not to have is: Is global warming real? By now it's entirely obvious that the scientists are basically right—that's why there's half as much ice in the Arctic as when they started warning us, and half as many coral reefs. Donald

politicians who don't want to take strong action against oil companies. When local environmental justice groups, for instance, asked then-California Gov. Jerry Brown to stop permitting new oil wells next to their schools and homes, he responded with roughly the sensitivity and candor of Oklahoma's climate-denying Sen. Jim Inhofe. Environmentalists, he said, wanted him to "snap my fingers and eliminate all gasoline in all California gasoline stations." And if he did that, he said, "What would happen? Revolution? Killings? Shootings?"

But of course no one had asked him to do that—just to stop granting new permits for new oil wells so that gradually the state (and the world) could transition to safer sources. Climate activists are consummate realists—

they know better than anyone else how entrenched fossil fuels really are, and how much work it will take to root them out. It literally can't happen overnight; it literally must happen fast enough to match the demands of physics.

The second straw man is even more annoying. Whenever there's a story about a climate protest, the comments section of the website is sure to include a line of people saying "they drove a bus to the demonstration and that bus burned gas," as if this somehow undercuts the action. We live in the world we

are trying to change: If it requires driving to change it, then of course it makes sense to do it. Anyone can do the math. I *flew* when I had to to fight the Keystone XL pipeline, and I'm glad I did because for nearly a decade the protests we helped organize kept 800,000 barrels of very dirty oil in the ground every single day.

The very fact that one must drive or fly to do this work makes clear why it's needed—you can't take a train if there isn't one and at least in America that's usually the case. If you stay home to be pure, the system doesn't change. So I happily Skype into most of the speeches and lectures I give, but when I need to hit the road I don't worry.

Especially because I know there's no satisfying these critics. When Seattleites took to the water by the thousands in small boats to block the giant Shell drilling rig headed to the Arctic, their opponents said, "Yes, but their kayaks are made of plastic, and plastic comes from oil." These are not the objections of people sincere about hypocrisy; these are the absurd last-ditch objections of people who have run out of real arguments. ■



Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, is the author most recently of *Radio Free Vermont: A Fable of Resistance*.

These are the absurd last-ditch objections of people who have run out of real arguments.

Trump aside (there's a nice thought), this one is so clear even the oil companies don't dispute it, though of course they try to delay and minimize the need for real change.

Deprived of that point of contention, those who want to disrupt the push for climate action fall back on two particularly dumb straw-man arguments, which are worth engaging just long enough to dispose of.

One is that climate activists want to "turn off fossil fuels tomorrow." You hear this from oil companies, but you also hear it from liberal

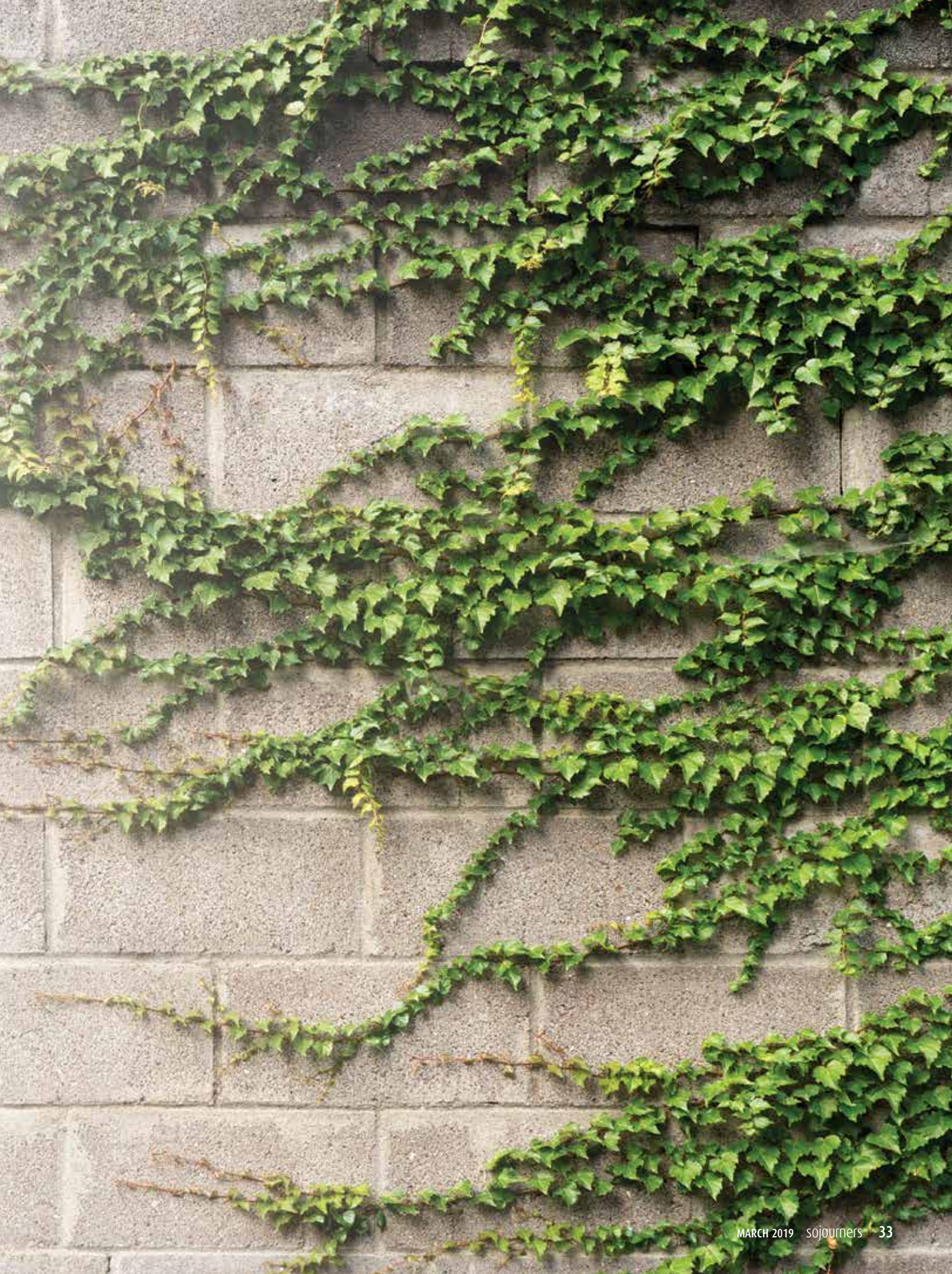
Rooted in Exile

We've been sent a letter from Jeremiah, wherein lies a future with hope. Consider it and live.

by **BILL WYLIE-KELLERMANN**

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. **But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.** For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. ... For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you." —**Jeremiah 29:4-12**

Photos by Shutterstock



Beware of pastoral letters sent by prophets. They can pack a punch. Says this one, what do you want first? The good news or the bad? And from where you sit, can you tell the difference? It's always tempting to read without context, or to quickly presume our own. In which case this might yield a bumper sticker for urban ministry: Seek the Welfare of the City. Or some universal and individual dictum of God's love.

But time and place are crucial to interpretation. This one, from the prophet Jeremiah, was penned in the reign of King Zedekiah, between the first Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E. and the final destruction of Jerusalem and temple in 587, with a second deportation. It is a letter sent to the exiles by way of the king's official couriers. The location of the letter is betwixt and between. Written in Jerusalem, read in Babylon. For that matter, kind of like our situation.

So, from where do we read? Equally crucial to know. William Stringfellow, in his *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, put it like this:

[A] nation, or any other principality, may be such a dehumanizing influence with respect to human life in society, may be of such anti-human purpose and policy, may pursue such a course which so demeans human life and so profits death that it must be said, analytically as well as metaphorically, that that nation or other principality is in truth governed by the power of death.

The spectacular example, in the earlier part of the 20th century, of a nation and society and its majority classes and its leaders existing in precisely this condition is, of course, Nazi Germany.

The biblical story of such a realm is the saga of Babylon.

The extraordinary instance in the present time of the same situation is the United States of America.

For the first century Christian movement, the Babylon parables of John's Revelation provided a code and clue for understanding themselves in a "foreign location," an eschatological exile at the very least. Earlier, under the seductions and brutality of the Greek empire, Jews took heart and nonviolent tactics from the Babylon narrative and visions in the book of Daniel. With the memory of the Middle Passage in mind, Jamaicans used "Babylon" to name their exile (think: Rastafarians and Bob Marley).

A few years ago, when emergency management was imposed in Detroit, when all the powers of government and more were invested in one person replacing elected officials, the city council simply rolled over to it. But the elected Detroit public school board continued to fight—in court, at the schools, in the street, at meetings—continuing to represent parents and students. They called themselves the School Board in Exile.

The politics of dislocation

Though he is practically a perfect stand-in, we don't need Trump cast as Nebuchadnezzar (he'd play an even better Nero) to understand ourselves as strangers in this foreign land of U.S. empire. We either know dislocation in our guts or we are mindless imperial agents. The New Testament summons us to be in this world system, but not of it.

As to dislocation, I commend a book called *Root Shock*, by social psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove, who teaches urban policy and health at The New School in New York. The title concerns what happens to individuals and communities when they are abruptly and forcibly pulled up by the roots and a community's cultural and emotional ecosystem is destroyed. Shock can happen to plants, to persons, and to entire communities.

Fullilove follows the history of urban renewal (then called by some "negro removal") which, in the midst of the freedom struggle, structurally assaulted the rooted places from which the African-American community drew its life. She describes an archipelago of urban ghettos where music, culture, and meaning thrived, all of which was destroyed, first with contagious housing decline and then with the blunt end of the bulldozer, expelling people into trauma and exile. Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood is one depicted. The politics of dislocation. Think of the Babylonian exiles as living under the trauma of root shock.

The literary setting of the letter to the exiles is important. The book of Jeremiah had a complex literary history, with layers of editors. Jeremiah himself had a scribe who tracked his public utterances but also narrated events. The letter is situated at the conclusion of several chapters of such narration, in particular certain events of public conflict and prophetic suppression. And it appears just before the so-called "book of comfort," which pivots from a pounding judgment of pending destruction to the love and mercy of God, the promise of covenantal renewal, remnant, and return. It may be cold comfort, but this letter teases the way into what's next.

The "sign prophet"

The narrative of Baruch, Jeremiah's able scribe, variously provides glimpses of opposition but also the cost paid by the prophet: He's chained in stocks, arrested, tried for capital offense, and imprisoned in a filthy cistern.

The chapter immediately before the letter tells of a public argument with Hananiah, the temple prophet, who puts forward his own prophesy, "thus says the Lord," that this deportation will be over quick. Jeremiah responds, Amen, may it be as you say, but I don't think so. To make his own point, he enters the debate wearing a yoke.

Thanks to our narrator, we know that Jeremiah was a "sign prophet," doing actions to illustrate and embody his words. So he smashes pots in the public square to



warn of coming destruction, buys real estate as hope when the crashing market says there's no future in which to invest, and buries clothes in the ground to show what they are like when dug up later.

Hananiah responds that two can play this sign game, and he promptly grabs the yoke and breaks it in the name of the Lord. Hmmm. Jeremiah seems to back off, but he actually escalates, returning now with an iron yoke.

All of this is to say that though the letter is a letter, it is also itself an action, a sign; it is both word and deed. Slipped into the bag of the king's courier, it is a very public letter and so a very public witness.

If exile is "root shock," this pastoral letter from a prophet urges re-rooting. Embrace the "strange land" as long-haul location? Seek the welfare of the city, which

neighbor, community, creation—all that and more. It's both beating swords into plowshares and sitting sufficient and sustainable beneath one's vine and fig tree. Sabbath and Jubilee economics are practically programmatic of shalom.

Think of Jesus walking the movement into Jerusalem. The city's name means "foundation of peace" (you can hear it in *salem*/shalom). He says they don't know the things that make for peace. There again translation fails us. The gospels write the Greek *eirene*/peace, but Jesus would have said shalom. The "foundation of shalom" has forgotten "the things that make for shalom."

So, after a forced march into town, seek the shalom of Babylon? The city where we hung up our lyres and the

Pray for the city that epitomizes the domination system and practices the myth of redemptive violence?

has taken us captive? Little wonder it's also contested on Babylonian soil. Hananiah has a counterpart and alter ego there. Shemaiah prophesies against Jeremiah on the spot and writes his own letter back to Jerusalem: Are there no stocks for such as him?

Our narrator makes the conflict a test case for "false prophecy." Taking the Lord's name in vain, as it were, pretending the authority of God's voice, is a capital offense, a charge that Jeremiah himself would face, as perhaps did Jesus. The test for false prophecy was, on the one hand, the heart of the hearer and the Torah of the Lord (Deuteronomy 13:1-5), but also the verities of history (Deuteronomy 18:19-22): Is this word born out?

Before the chapter is over, Hananiah is dead, and Jeremiah says the same will fall upon Shemaiah (29:32). The whole thing gives great pause, underscoring the discernable ambiguity and vulnerability of speaking in the flux of the moment. It's fair warning to the prophets of court and temple, but to street prophets as well. Martin Luther King Jr. called it "a vocation of agony." If only all pastors took such seriousness in speaking the Word.

The things that make for shalom

Seek the welfare of the city to which I have sent you. So says Jeremiah. That is a tepid translation of what is beneath the text. "Seek the peace" is equally insufficient. There is no English equivalent for shalom. It is peace rooted in justice. Wholeness. Right relation with God,

songs of Zion stuck in our throats? Pray for the city that epitomizes the domination system and practices the myth of redemptive violence? Shalom is the complete opposite of the imperial way. Wait. What? Is this the love of enemies or something?

Shalom in Babylon is certainly a countersign, a form of subversion if not the seed of transformation. Jeremiah details a multidimensional shape to putting down roots in the near term. It's simple and suggestive: build, plant, marry. The built environment of shalom is physical, social, spiritual. It's certainly not palaces and mansions but homes modest and centered, equal and sufficient, an urban landscape configured for justice. To "plant" summons images of integral urban gardens around which rooted communities may be nourished, but also a renewed connection to earth, honored and tended. Empire extracts and imports grain; exiles grow it beneath their feet. And "marry" means thinking not only about relationship and kin, but generations back and forward.

All this may have been for them hard to imagine—but we had better. We find ourselves exiles in a strange land. We've been sent a letter by biblical courier. This way lies a future with hope. Consider it and live. ■

Bill Wylie-Kellermann is a nonviolent community activist, pastor, writer, and teacher in Detroit. His most recent book is Dying Well: The Resurrected Life of Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann (Cass Community Publishers, 2018). This Bible study was prepared for Sojourners' 2018 Summit.

To the Woman at the Memorial for My Deceased Aunt Who Asked Me Why I Had Not Accepted Jesus as My Lord and Savior Hours After Eleven Worshipers Were Gunned Down at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh

I know you believe you are doing God's work when you ask me
"Are you a Christian?" and instantly retort to my "No" with "Why not?"

I know you do not know how the hairs stand up on the back of my neck
when first you question my failure to embrace Jesus as my Lord and Savior
and then interrupt with that world-weary "Ahhh ..." as I say,
"Well, my mother's family was Jewish—"

I know you had my number when a woman rose from the audience earlier
and encouraged her fellow mourners to seek out "anyone here today
who doesn't yet know Jesus." Even though we hadn't met yet. Even though
you didn't know my name.

I know you do not know that for many non-Christian people,

particularly for Jews,
particularly for Muslims,
particularly for those of a darker hue,

the questions "Are you a Christian? Why not?"

cause a little knot to form in the belly,
a little jolt of adrenaline to pulse through the veins.

I know you do not know that "Are you a Christian? Why not? Why not?"

summons tribal memories of forced conversions and of ghettos
summons family memories of broken glass and cattle cars
summons my memories

(they are my memories. I swear they are)

of electrified razor wire and smoking chimneys
of scarecrow bodies with the skin hanging off like dirty sheets
of children dumped into reeking mass graves

of you
of you
of you.

Adele Hoffman is a pseudonym for the poet, who lives in Richmond, Va.

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Christianapp.org

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Good Shepherd Volunteers

GSVolunteers.org

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Johnson Service Corps

Johnsonservicecorps.org

Johnson Service Corps is an ecumenical community of young adults dedicated to social justice in Chapel Hill and Durham, N.C. JSC offers a year of engagement and training, intentional community living, and spiritual formation.



Bilingual Education for Central America (BECA)

Becaschools.org

BECA's mission is to provide quality bilingual education to the educationally disenfranchised while fostering meaningful cultural exchange. Our model is built on partnership between Hondurans committed to quality, progressive education and international volunteers interested in a truly meaningful cultural collaboration.



Christ House Volunteer Corps

Christhouse.org/volunteer/yiv-application

Volunteer Corps offers both medical and nonmedical roles for individuals seeking the opportunity to serve folks who are homeless with acute medical illness in Washington, D.C. Our Year Long Volunteers (YLVs) live in intentional community for their service year, which runs June to June.



Dominican Volunteers USA

Dvusa.org

Dominican Volunteers respond to the needs of our sisters and brothers, especially those who are economically poor and marginalized. Our program remains committed to the four pillars of Dominican spirituality: prayer, study, community, and ministry.



Jesuit Volunteer Corps

Jesuitvolunteers.org

JVC offers full-time service opportunities in 47 communities across six countries. Explore the values of Ignatian spirituality, simple living, intentional community, and social justice as you work for justice within poor and marginalized communities.



L'Arche USA

Larcheusa.org/assistant

Imagine a world where all gifts are welcome! At L'Arche, people with and without intellectual disabilities live, work, pray, and play together. We have 17 intentional communities across the U.S. with summer and full-time opportunities.

SERVICE SHOWCASE • PUT YOUR FAITH INTO ACTION • sojo.net/ServiceShowcase**LeaderworX**

Center for FaithJustice
Leaderworx.org

LeaderworX is a summer program for young adults focused on service, social justice, faith, leadership, and intentional community, while actively ministering to youth, promoting peace and justice, and discerning a vocation. Join us!

**Maryknoll Lay Missioners**

Mklm.org

Maryknoll Lay Missioners live and work in communities struggling with poverty in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, building the capacity of local partners to respond to basic needs and helping to create a more just and compassionate world. Email join@mklm.org if you are interested!

**Project Transformation Summer Internship**

Projecttransformation.org/news/apply-serve-be-transformed

Project Transformation is hiring college-age young adults to serve and lead summer programs for children, exploring faith in action, living in intentional Christian community, and ultimately witnessing impact through building mutual relationships. Apply now to participate in this life-changing experience!

**Service Never Sleeps**

Serviceneversleeps.org

Service Never Sleeps empowers individuals and communities to catalyze social justice through service and Allyship. They host a yearlong Fellowship that places millennial

professionals with local nonprofits to complete skills-based service on a part-time basis.

**XPLOR**

National Benevolent Association
Nbacares.org/xplor

Young adults ages 21-30: Dedicate 10 months connecting the life of faith to the work of justice. Live, serve, and lead in community; say yes to God's

dreams for your life. Limited placements remaining for 2019-20!

**Loretto Volunteer Program**

Lorettovolunteers.org

Loretto Volunteers serve full-time at social justice organizations while living in intentional community with other volunteers for one year. Placements are available in Denver, El Paso, St. Louis, New York, and Washington, D.C.

**PULSE Fellow 2019-2020**

Pulsepittsburgh.org/serve-with-us

PULSE Fellows SERVE with a Pittsburgh nonprofit, LIVE in community, and GROW as leaders. During this year of service (August to August), PULSE Fellow benefits include housing, monthly stipends, loan deferment eligibility. Applications due March 3.

**Rostro de Cristo**

Long-term and short-term opportunities
Rostrodecristo.org

Rostro de Cristo invites young adults to live and serve within marginalized communities on the outskirts of Guayaquil, Ecuador, for one year to experience the spirit of the Gospels; to find and be the face of Christ in their daily encounters. Email faceofchrist@rostrodecristo.org if you are interested!

**Summer Communities of Service**

United Church of Christ
Ucc.org/volunteer_scos

Serve local communities throughout the U.S. in long-term disaster recovery, food justice through community gardening, and economic equity through children's enrichment. Serve at the intersection of faith communities and social justice. Reflect on action and be part of intentional community.

**Young Adult Service Communities**

United Church of Christ
Ucc.org/volunteer_yasc

Become a faith-based justice leader. Join local communities acting for affordable housing, environmental sustainability, immigration reform, public health, and racial justice. Serve at the intersection of faith communities and social justice. Reflect on action and be part of intentional community.



Sojourners Fellowship Program

JP Keenan

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We offer positions in editing, online media, event planning, advocacy, donor services, executive management, advertising, and communications.

Our unique fellowship program is one of Christian discipleship and vocational discernment. The program is open to anyone 21 years old and up, as well as all career paths. To learn more about the program and the application process, visit sojo.net/fellows. The application for the 2019-20 year—August 2019 to August 2020—is available now.

The application deadline is Feb. 15, 2019.



CultureWatch
BOOKS ART MUSIC FILM

By Kathryn Post

Beauty Resurrected from **Brokenness**

Out of tensions over difference, Mosaic Theater creates paths to communal renewal.

IN ITS MOST BASIC FORM, theater is about transformation: altering voices, mannerisms, appearances, and scenery until what was becomes unrecognizable. Theater is also about resurrection: an empty stage brought to life, an untold story come alive. And no theater better embodies resurrection than Mosaic Theater.

In fall 2014, the Edlavitch Jewish Community Center (JCC) of Washington, D.C., forced its theater company, Theater J, to cancel the critically acclaimed Voices of the Changing Middle East Festival due to pressure from JCC donors upset with the festival's controversial nature. Ari Roth, Theater J's artistic director, protested the end of the festival's groundbreaking interfaith dialogue and was subsequently fired. Afterward, he established Mosaic Theater, of which he is the founding artistic director.

"In a way, it was a very dramatic, abrupt, and even violent birth," Roth told *Sojourners*. "It involved collateral damage, harsh words, a firing, accusations of censorship, a divorce. There was a rupture."

Mosaic Theater was born from broken relationship—yet today it stands as a testament to inclusion, reconciliation, and renewal. Located on H Street in D.C.'s Northeast quadrant, Mosaic is a thriving fusion community committed to producing high-quality, socially

Above, a scene from "Unexplored Interior," a play about the Rwanda genocide, at the Mosaic Theater in Washington, D.C.



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climax, Anthony, played by Marni Penning, asks, “How can we learn to stay in the room with people we hate and who hate us?”

Performed during the 2018 midterm elections, this production boldly considers a model of authentic allyship in an age of oppression and political turmoil.

The theater’s Voices from a Changing Middle East Festival, which is now in its 18th year after being carried over from

Mosaic Theater was born from broken relationship—yet today it stands as a testament to inclusion, reconciliation, and renewal.

Theater J by Roth, also stages conflict and complex alliances. The festival traditionally produces plays focusing on the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. But as Victoria Baatin, associate artistic director for Mosaic, remarked, “The festival is a space to put voices from different sides of any given spectrum in dynamic tension.”

Roth added that staging difficult encounters is part of the theater’s values. “We want to put onstage fraught partnerships and examine them, to try to create functionality from disfunction—especially as they traverse ideological or political, religious, or racial lines.”

Leveraging levity

The Mosaic community welcomes discord and grapples with injustice, yet still provides ample room for laughter.

“Although we’re often dealing with heavy topics ... it became a priority for us to find the humor and to find opportunities to uplift as we’re shining a light and amplifying voices and stories,” said Baatin. Mosaic’s 2018-19 season does just that. The season’s third show, “Oh, God” is the first comedy piece in the Voices Festival. Considered Mosaic’s “holiday show,” the play’s director, Michael Bloom, characterized the production as “a feminist commentary that deals with the patriarchal, traditional God we

Continued on Page 43

relevant art in an uncensored environment. It is now in the middle of its fourth season, titled “How Hope Happens.”

“Moving to Mosaic meant we would lose Judaism but keep the prophetic piece. It would be multifaith, a mosaic of faiths united by common values. And the top value was a belief in the power of art to transform and transport people and communities to new places,” said Roth.

Artistic agitators

The Mosaic community embraces friction. The second of eight plays featured this season, “The Agitators,” showcases the enduring, abrasive, 45-year relationship between Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass. The two rarely see eye to eye. Interests conflict and tempers flare as Anthony and Douglass strive to secure voting rights for women and African Americans, respectively. During the play’s

New & Noteworthy



Let the Beat Drop

Hamildrops, a series of 12 singles inspired by *Hamilton*, includes a range of artists (Black Thought, The Regrettes, Sara Bareilles) singing or rapping on topics such as racism, domestic abuse, and recovery efforts in Puerto Rico. The last released song features gospel legend BeBe Winans and Barack Obama. Hamildrops.com

Tackling Health Disparities

How Neighborhoods Make Us Sick: Restoring Health and Wellness to Our Communities offers an innovative, Christ-centered vision for approaching health disparities in inner cities. Drawing on professional experience in community development and public health, Veronica Squires and Breanna Lathrop outline achievable goals for promoting health equity. InterVarsity Press

Emergency Prayer

99 Prayers Your Church Needs (But Doesn’t Know It Yet): Prayers for Unpredictable and Unusual Times, edited by Cara Gilger, offers congregations divine words for tough situations, such as a church leader’s arrest in a nonviolent protest, sexual assault allegations, and a death by overdose. Chalice Press

Lasting Change

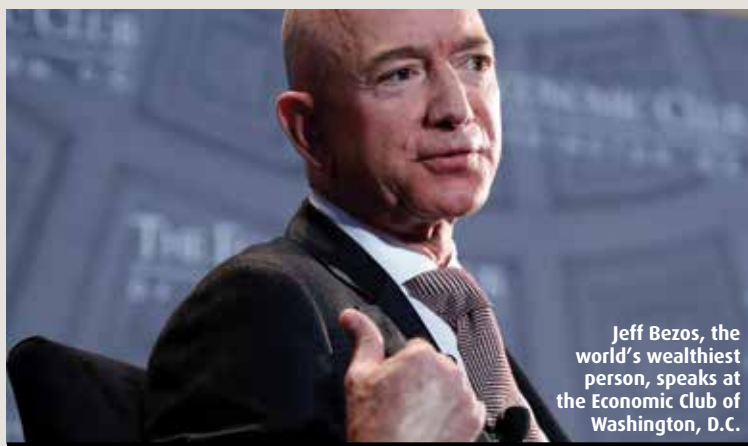
After the Protests Are Heard, by Sharon D. Welch, answers a question many activists have asked: Once the demonstration has ended, and the world knows we want change, what should we do next? Welch surveys various institutions to find guidance on how to secure lasting fairness and equality. NYU Press

There's No Stopping Populism

A SPECTER IS haunting the neo-liberal establishments of Europe and the Americas: populism. And the intelligentsia beholden to those establishments is pitching a hissy fit in response.

You can see it happening via publications such as *The Atlantic*—with headlines such as “What Populists Do to Democracies” and “How to Be a Populist”—and *The Guardian*, which has devoted an inordinate amount of its cyberspace to “Team Populism,” a transnational network of academics studying the rise of populist movements and leaders. A search of my university library database shows 1,259 books with the word “populism” in the title published just since 2016. *The Guardian* even offers a “How Populist Are You?” quiz.

The current populist moment gives the international commentariat a lot to chew on. For starters, there is so much disagreement about what “populism” even means. It’s



Jeff Bezos, the world's wealthiest person, speaks at the Economic Club of Washington, D.C.

Reuters

is worthy of so much study and discussion because it is alleged to pose a threat to liberal democracy. Best I can tell, this is because populism doesn’t lend itself to consensus-building and compromise, or to an appropriate reverence for long-standing procedures. The problem here is, of course, the presumption that consensus is the highest goal of political action in a democracy. To the neoliberals, populism is a

problem because it is rude enough to insist that politics actually be about

big, substantial questions that may require big, sweeping answers and major dislocations of the existing power structure.

The fact is that our country—and most of the world—is ruled by elites who pile up wealth and privilege for themselves, by disenfranchising and impoverishing masses of people. The experts identify populism with a destructive “us against them” mentality. But sometimes “us against them” simply reflects reality.

For example, in the U.S., the conflict between “us,” the stagnant-wage-earning majority, and “them,” the billionaire class, is real and irreconcilable.

The three richest people

in our country—Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffet—own more of the nation’s wealth than the entire bottom half of the U.S. population. They may not be an evil, conspiratorial cabal, but their wealth rests on a foundation of low wages for the people and low taxes for themselves, and it allows them and their billionaire colleagues to exercise outsized influence on the country’s economic policies and priorities. Something as simple as a reasonable taxation of the billionaire class would allow us to fund a public sector that could provide universal health care, family supports, and useful work for all who want it.

In 2019, the populist genie is out of the bottle. There is no going back to the days of the corporate neoliberal consensus, and good riddance. Going forward, we can either have a populism that divides the people, through appeals to racism and cultural resentment, or we can have a populism that unites the “have-nots”—of all races, ethnicities, and genders—in a common struggle for justice and equity. ■



Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.

In 2019, the populist genie is out of the bottle.

hard to see how a word regularly applied to Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders can mean much of anything at all. In their work, the Team Populism people try to sort out this left-right mishmash by detaching the phenomenon of populism from its associations with socialism and ethno-nationalism. They consider populism not an ideology for governing but a strategy for attaining and keeping power. According to their June 2018 policy paper: “[Scholars] call something populist if it expresses the belief that politics embodies a struggle between the forces of good, understood as the will of the common people, and the forces of evil, associated with a conspiring elite.”

Supposedly, the populist threat

Continued from Page 41

know from the Old Testament.”

The play cheekily considers what happens when Ella, a secular psychotherapist, receives a new, high-profile patient: God. Over the span of one session, God grapples with his feelings of isolation, boasts of his last-minute addition to creation (a kangaroo: “I thought, why not put in a pocket for the baby?”), and attempts to fix a finicky DVD player. Interspersed with sometimes hilarious, sometimes hard-hitting observations by Ella (“Only God could be so inhuman”), this offering showcases Mosaic’s ability to strike the perfect balance of humor and intensity.

A community theater

A core component of Mosaic’s identity is its commitment to be a theater by and for the community. Mosaic offers neighborhood discounts to those in the Northeast and Southeast quadrants of D.C., and most of the theater’s subscribers come from within

At Mosaic, diversity isn’t an afterthought: It’s part of the DNA.

its own zip code. The result is that Mosaic serves a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood that’s in the middle of change.

Mosaic also fosters community by partnering with local writers and producing their plays. The theater’s initiative to commission pieces from local writers allows playwrights at Mosaic—including Roth, who continues to write pieces even as founding director—to nurture local talent.

“Building a major work from a local place of origin is not only tremendously exciting, but it’s also efficient,” said Roth. “And there’s such a wealth of talent here, in terms of the issues of race and identity that Mosaic is working on.”

Authentic diversity

At Mosaic, diversity isn’t an afterthought: It’s part of the DNA. “It’s trendy to be diverse and it’s trendy to be inclusive,” said Baatin. “But Mosaic is not doing it as an additive. It is built into our vision and core values as a company. So we talk about not just diversity, but also inclusion, equity, and access. It’s not



Willem Dafoe in
*The Last Temptation
of Christ* (1988)

GOODNESS AND MERCY

WILLEM DAFOE is my favorite onscreen Jesus, and since **The Last Temptation of Christ’s** release three decades ago, he’s been indelibly associated with that role. His Jesus was a corrective to the over-mysticized versions in epics such as *Ben-Hur* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, which portray Jesus as a kind of magician instead of a person.

Dafoe’s Jesus (which is also the Jesus of novelist Nikos Kazantzakis and Paul Schrader, who adapted Kazantzakis’ work for the screen) is a serious attempt at grappling with the human questions his story demands. This Jesus is a breathing, sweating, sleeping, dancing, agonizing, raging Jesus: a political Jesus who prefers a donkey to a revolution; a compassionate Jesus who struggles to figure out his own needs amid the burdens of the world; a thinking Jesus who doesn’t emerge from the womb with a fully formed philosophy but learns by experience, scripture, and prayer.

Fictionalized Jesuses are, of course, like any other Jesus: We see all the Jesuses we’ve ever met through the lens of our own experience. The light of Willem Dafoe’s Jesus (not to mention his astonishing portrayal of Vincent van Gogh in the recent masterpiece *At Eternity’s Gate*) is more useful to me than the “magician” versions because I’m not sure I can learn much from superheroes.

Having said that, the most immediately surprising thing about Dafoe’s most

popular film, the massive DC Comics action fantasy **Aquaman**, is that it presents a coherent story and is consistently entertaining for its nearly two-and-a-half-hour running time. The second surprise is that it has something meaningful to say about the world in which we live.

Its hero, Arthur, is the child of an earthbound human and a sort of undersea goddess, so he must navigate two ways of seeing and being. The fact that he is played by native Hawaiian Jason Momoa and Arthur’s father is played by Māori actor Temuera Morrison may be coincidental but also represents something meaningful: After the brilliant *Black Panther* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, a transition to mainstream multicultural hero-hood continues.

What’s even more important is that the new king, Arthur, doesn’t want to rule with an iron rod. The entire plot of *Aquaman* hinges on its protagonist learning that mercy is better than sacrifice. It’s one of the strongest challenges to the myth of redemptive violence I’ve seen in a movie of this scale. And while Willem Dafoe is only a supporting character in the film, he gets to participate in doing a very Jesus-esque thing to the bad guy. ■

Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and founder of moviesandmeaning.com and www.irelandretreats.com.



Scenes from
Mosaic Theater's
"The Agitators"

diversity for diversity's sake."

Since its first season, Mosaic has exhibited its commitment to inclusion by featuring performances on topics such as a Muslim transgender person transitioning, Filipino migrants performing as drag queens, and a young black woman facing unexpected pregnancy. The Mosaic adaption of "Oh, God" includes an autistic character—the psychotherapist's teenage son, Lior, played by Sean McCoy. The production utilizes an autism coach to ensure appropriate representation of autistic behavior.

Mosaic is also remarkably accessible. For example, Mosaic incorporated surtitles into the scenography of "The Agitators" for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. For other plays, Mosaic offers assisted listening devices and can provide large print programs or script copies if requested a week prior to a performance.

Fully alive

Though Mosaic was birthed from the ruins of controversy, its bold, vibrant productions

exemplify beauty resurrected from brokenness. And threads of resurrection are woven throughout Mosaic's efforts to engage in the prophetic impulse to reckon and reconcile.

This season, "The Agitators" reveals the beauty of sacrificial love when it asks viewers to fight for one another as much as they fight for themselves. "Shame 2.0," which is being reimaged and partially rewritten by Roth, deals with the unexpected partnership of Israeli and Palestinian artists amid an elaborate censorship controversy. "Oh, God" also shows the power of redeemed relationships when a psychotherapist rediscovers faith in God—and God rediscovers love for humanity.

"The greatest command we have is to love. And not just to love, but to spur one another to love," said Baatin. "And I think that theater ... helps us to recognize the



humanity in the other person that's right next to us. It's through recognizing that humanity that we can increase our empathy. And then, through that increase in empathy, maybe begin to creep toward that expression of love."

By embracing the tension between despair and

levity, brokenness and reconciliation, hate and love—and by doing so from the vantage point of an authentically diverse community—Mosaic explores the full breadth and depth of what it means to be alive.

"What we hope to do," said Roth, "is to enter some tough chasms and divides that separate people, explore some of the darkest corners of the human condition, and, within our common humanity, create roads of redemption." ■

Kathryn Post is an editorial assistant of Sojourners.

Reviewed by Karen González

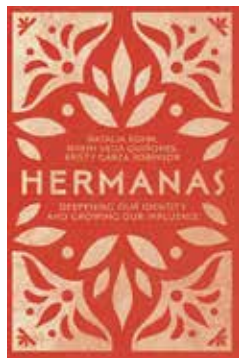
LATINA IDENTITY AND THE BIBLE

Hermanas: Deepening Our Identity and Growing Our Influence, by Natalia Kohn, Noemi Vega Quiñones, and Kristy Garza Robinson. InterVarsity Press Books.

IN ITS THIRD chapter, *Hermanas* asks: “What is your beautifully empowering narrative that may influence your *hermanas* [sisters] around you and those that are to come after you?” In the most wonderful way, the book’s three authors—Natalia Kohn, Noemi Vega Quiñones, and Kristy Garza Robinson—share their own stories to answer this essential question. Through the writing, they become the Latina mentors and role models many Latinas want and need, as many of us have no such examples in our communities.

What comes through these pages is how much these writers embrace their identities as Latinas, how much they love their communities, and how deeply they’ve experienced God through their identities.

They rightfully make no apology for writing this book for the many Latinas that may have had similar experiences with dominant white Christian culture. They read, interpret, and apply the Bible from the perspective of not just Latinx culture, but the specific experiences of Latinas who often find themselves doubly marginalized by



challenging the reader to lead and empower out of connection to the God who calls her. Each chapter invites Latina readers to pray and consider how the story they’ve just read might apply to their own. I found this to be the most powerful and effective part of the book: The authors help us Latinas see ourselves in biblical stories, providing inspiration for engagement and leadership.

I was empowered by the Spanish phrases and narratives unique to our cultures throughout the book. These aspects give the text an intimate feel, because only those with personal insider knowledge of Latinx cultures would understand all the nuances.

What both enriches this book and becomes problematic is that each of the three authors writes four chapters. This provides the book with a breadth of experiences, since all the women are proven Latina leaders in multicultural ministries, but it also makes the book a bit uneven. Some of the chapters include great theological depth and research, while others rely on dominant and traditional perspectives on the scriptures with a Latinx twist or don’t have any research support at all. Despite this, many of the book’s ideas ring true.

I highly recommend this book not just to Latinas but to all Christians. We should all be able to read the Bible from multiple perspectives, especially those from the margins. Journeying

with these sisters and their reflections on the scriptures will reveal to you the beauty of embracing your identity as you follow Christ. ■

Karen González is a speaker, writer, and immigrant advocate who lives in Baltimore. Her new book is The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong.



Reviewed by Elinam Agbo

FAMILIAR AND PAINFUL REALITIES

She Would Be King, by Wayétu Moore. Graywolf Press.

“FENGBE, KEH KAMBA BEH. Fengbe, kemu beh. *We have nothing but we have God. We have nothing but we have each other.*”

Like the voice of the wind, this song pervades the vivid landscape of Wayétu Moore’s debut novel, in which the Liberian-born writer explores the early days of Liberia, in the 1840s, through three characters: Gbessa, June Dey, and Norman Aragon.

In *She Would Be King*, these three impossible lives (and a country) emerge out of slavery, violence, and exile. Death eludes and “mocks” Gbessa, of the Vai people, who constantly suffers the pain of dying without its relief. Born on a cursed day, Gbessa grows up under house arrest until she is exiled. Alone in the forest, torn from her family and people, she sings, “Fengbe keh kamba beh. Femgbe, kemu beh.” The “we” of this song haunts the reality of Gbessa’s situation, and to offer a glimpse of the big picture, Moore writes: “The words ascended, joining the traveling wind, and sometimes it was as though someone were singing with her.”

And someone was. Across time, language, and distance. Ol’ Ma Famatta sits in the moon, and the slave once known as Charlotte whispers comfort in the wind as if to say loneliness is not forever, as if to promise Gbessa that she is not alone.

Across the Atlantic, on a Virginia plantation, June Dey becomes a free man after he discovers his inhuman strength and invulnerable skin. In Jamaica, Norman Aragon, who can disappear at will, uses his powers to seek

“What is your empowering narrative that may influence your *hermanas* around you and those that are to come after you?”

racism and sexism and, thus, unheard. The authors provide examples of biblical women such as Esther, Deborah, and Hannah who embrace their ethnicity and challenges to become leaders and teachers in their spheres of influence, whether directly or indirectly.

The book is divided into two parts: “Identity and Intimacy,” inviting the Latina reader to know God more deeply through her Latina identity, and “Influence and Impact,”

his mother's dream of Africa. Like Gbessa, Norman and June Dey have suffered loss. Like Gbessa, they wander alone, with only the whispering wind and history to guide them.

"Take care, my darling," the wind whispers. "Take care, my friend."

It is a difficult feat to bring together people from different lands, but Moore deftly weaves these lives through their shared gifts and the narrating wind, a sorrowful but hope-filled voice that shares their history and sees them as one people.

After the characters meet in Monrovia, Liberia's capital, Moore moves outward, gesturing toward the particulars of history, how the formerly enslaved came to settle in the land that became Liberia. At one point in the narrative, Gbessa is separated from her companions during a battle with French invaders. She is found by a group of settlers, learns their language and customs, marries into society, and mourns her past—those she left behind, the person she

Three impossible lives (and a country) emerge out of slavery, violence, and exile.

used to be. Even though the novel begins to lose its enchanting voice after it tells the origin stories of Gbessa, June Dey, and Norman Aragon, Moore clearly highlights the rifts between the African-American settlers and the Indigenous tribes, the complexities that arise when we question who is foreign and who is familiar.

With this poignant debut, Wayétu Moore situates herself as a bold storyteller, a weaver of historical threads and magical realism. Rooted in familiar and painful realities, the novel evokes the authority of fairy tales. Late in the narrative, the gifted companions come together once again to fight for Liberia, for settlers and tribes alike. Their numbers are few, their resources sparse, but even as they face defeat, Gbessa echoes the truth of her existence: She will not die. They will not die. ■

Elinam Agbo is an MFA candidate at the University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' Program. Born in Ghana, she grew up in the U.S. Midwest.



Plyaset

Reviewed by Jason Wood

ECOLOGICAL ROMANCE

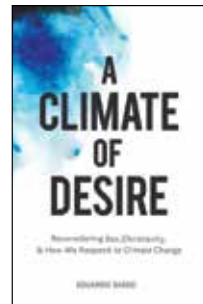
A Climate of Desire: Reconsidering Sex, Christianity, and How We Respond to Climate Change, by Eduardo Sasso. Wipf and Stock.

IF YOU'RE LIKE me, your first response to the title of Eduardo Sasso's book was "What?!" But, as unusual as the pairing of climate change and sex is, Sasso proves that their association is fitting. *A Climate of Desire* argues that the challenge of today's climate crisis is ultimately not about technology, science, or political will. Rather, like sex, it's "about desire: about what we long for and about the consequences of our longings."

Our longings have always been ripe for co-optation. Sasso's book shows how, throughout history, from the tower of Babel to the tech frontier of modern California, people have been tempted to forsake their God-given humanity for an artificial substitute. Our problem today, though, is that our refusal to learn from the past comes with an exorbitant price tag. Fossil fuels have enabled the unrestrained indulgence of our misplaced desires, transforming our cities into engines of unprecedented ecological devastation.

In *A Climate of Desire*, Sasso reminds us that the Spirit-inspired imagination of ancient truth-tellers such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus himself has a great deal to offer us in our current predicament. Calling their contemporaries to repentance, these holy dreamers denounced the harlotry of cities and nations that were running after false gods of wealth and power. They proclaimed visions of the holy that bordered on the psychedelic and grasped that at the heart of injustice and violence is misplaced desire.

Sasso finds tremendous strength in these ancient voices. But he also gains inspiration from recent campaigns for civil rights and contemporary initiatives for ecological renewal, such as the Transition Network and the fossil-free divestment movement.



A Climate of Desire is part autobiography, part history, part biblical exegesis, and part social change handbook. Where the imagination of modern Western culture has been colonized by a materialistic, industrialized vision of a desacralized cosmos, Sasso invites us to liberate our hearts and minds to dream ancient dreams again.

"We can orient our cities toward sacred relationships of ecological romance, even as our climate of apathy changes into one of faith, hope, and love," he writes. Amen to that.

All in all, *A Climate of Desire* offers a compelling revisioning of humanity and our place in the divine ecosystem of creation. While Sasso's metaphoric, evocative language at times risks exaggeration and can be hard to follow, he understands something critical: We are ultimately moved to act not by argument and statistics, but by story, vision, and love.

It is Sasso's love for the living Source who invites all creation into a sacred romance that saturates this book. And it is this sort of love that will give readers the courage to break with the destructive systems of the modern-day Babylon in which we are enmeshed, to once again be agents of transformation within creation. Such love spurs us on with hope, at a time when a healthy ecological future for this planet never looked so bleak.

We cannot simply think our way into a new way of being in the world. For a healthier climate and world, we must be swept off our feet. ■

Jason Wood lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, and runs Red Clover Farms. He is co-founder of Earthkeepers: Christians for Climate Justice.

A View from the Underside: The Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"You accomplish... an astonishing fullness of Dietrich, the personality and the message."

~ Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's biographer

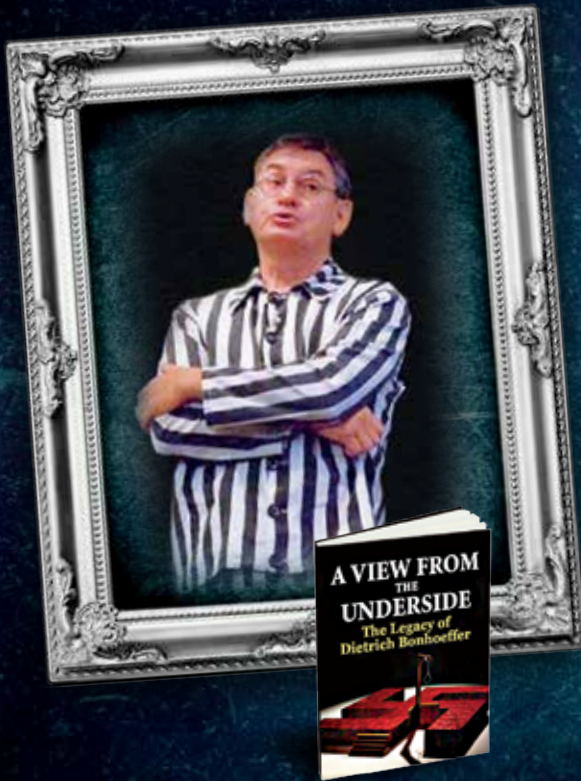
"When I watch Al Staggs as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I am confronted by the deepest moral questions of what it means to be a witness and how I am using my life."

~ Bill Moyers

"Al is a consummate actor, a knowing interpreter who manages to grasp and share the depth and dread of Bonhoeffer, at the same time hinting at the ways in which Bonhoeffer continues among us with contemporary relevance. Staggs' ability to communicate this awesome, dangerous saint is an enormous gift among us."

~ Walter Brueggemann

**CONTACT: Al Staggs :: al@alstaggs.com
www.peacewithjustice.com**



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'The Aliens Among You'

THE DEUTERONOMY PASSAGE that ushers in our Lenten pilgrimage underscores the sacred mandate to embrace foreign immigrants with generous hospitality. Instructions for the liturgy for harvest thanksgiving conclude: "Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you" (26:11). Worshippers are required to certify in the assembly before God that they have participated in providing what the vulnerable in society need, not least refugees. "I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows" (verse 13). Paul speaks of the Spirit of freedom removing the veil that blinds us to the core meaning of the sacred texts. In the current climate of xenophobia and incitements to make refugees into scapegoats, Christians are called to rip down the veil that prevents people from hearing this Word.

As for the intimate personal dimension or Lenten conversion, this might be the time to realize more profoundly that much of our own sinfulness and confusion arises from the harshness with which each one of us rejects and starves elements of our own inner "community of selves," those parts of our humanity we try to disclaim and repress. It is the Spirit's inner work of integration that teaches us to embrace those "selves of the self" we find ugly, pathetic, needy, or too passionate and creative for comfort. Our outer practice and inner practice of hospitality and inclusion belong together.



Martin L. Smith, an Episcopal priest, is an author, preacher, and retreat leader. He lives in Washington, D.C.

[MARCH 3]

Radiation Exposure

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43a

"AND ALL OF US with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). The Epiphany season's celebration of the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ concludes with the theme of transfiguration (*metamorphosis* is the Greek word). The appointed scriptures are the key for understanding the dynamic of Lent as we prepare to enter that season of renewal. Our transformation can never be accomplished by conforming to external imperatives, nor by the embracing of "values," however lofty and demanding. Our moral transformation works through contemplation of the open heart of God exposed in the self-giving life of Christ, a kind of contemplation as "radiation therapy" in which our inner falsity is irradiated by the beams of God's unbounded, costly love, lived out by Jesus through his "exodus" (Luke 9:31) into the cross.

Prayer is the perpetual treatment in which, little by little, we deepen our participation in the divine life of vulnerability, transparency, and truthfulness. "We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word" (2 Corinthians 4:2), but this is not the result of our own program of moral effort; it rises from "the Lord, the Spirit" doing the work of inner liberation in us while we are steadfastly fixing our gaze on Jesus.

[MARCH 10]

Exile and Vulnerability

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

"THE DEVIL CAN cite scripture for his purpose. An evil soul producing holy witness is like a villain with a smiling cheek, a goodly apple rotten at the heart. Oh,

what a goodly outside falsehood hath!" Shakespeare no doubt conceived these lines for *The Merchant of Venice* from his deep musings on the biblical story of the Fall and the gospel accounts of the testing of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness. This week's psalm is the very one that the devil quotes to Jesus to devoutly reassure him that God's favor will immunize Jesus from failure and injury. God "will command his angels concerning you, to guard you" (Psalm 91:11). But this is a spell of delusion, and Jesus shakes it off. Taking refuge in God means entering into the heart of holy vulnerability: God's track is away from immunity into solidarity with the broken and abandoned and leads to being "numbered with the transgressors."

The Deuteronomy passage outlining the liturgy of thanksgiving for God's bounty and favor in the Promised Land is shot through with warnings against specious piety. Gratitude for security and prosperity is indeed a "goodly apple," but unless it is seamed with ever-refreshed memories of exile and vulnerability, its heart is rotten. Our spiritual ancestors were wanderers seeking asylum, and any purported thanksgiving festival is invalid unless it includes the refugees and "the aliens who reside among you" (26:11).

[MARCH 17]

Circling Hawk

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

PAUL TALKED IN depth to the imperial guards who supervised his incarceration in Rome, with the result that they became versed in the gospel. This expertise in translating the good news into terms gentiles could understand informs Paul's use of current political terminology in his letter to converts in Philippi. Transposing Jesus' original "reign of God" language, Paul talks of our civic rights and responsibilities as citizens of God's own country: "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there we are expecting a Savior" (3:20). We are citizens of God's future realm of communion and peace.

In 1:27, Paul urges his friends to put that citizenship into practice, using the

verb *politeuein*. This active citizenship is the opposite of living as an *idiotes*, a private individual, someone heedless of all social responsibilities and indifferent to the claims of community. Our lives as citizens in God's future are intrinsically political and social, engaged in webs of relationship and networks of action.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus channels the *sophia*, the wisdom of God, in agonized frustration over the nation's refusal to take refuge in God rather than rickety political arrangements like Herod's corrupt regime. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Jesus said (13:34). His final attempt to gather the people into that trust is like the action of a mother bird who sees the hawk circling over her head. She forfeits her life to save the chicks, and Jesus readies himself to do the same.

[MARCH 24]

Blame Games

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8;
1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

RELIGION, ALAS, is a fertile field for the primal human urge to "connect the dots," to find patterns in the random play of accident and coincidence. In this week's gospel, Jesus pushes back at this habit by flatly denying the proposal that certain Galileans who were massacred by Herod in the temple "had it coming to them," and against the notion that God was punishing for personal sins the 18 victims crushed in a collapsed building in the capital. These moralistic blame games are not only groundless, but they serve as a deflection from the bigger issue of national betrayal of God's covenant. Jesus challenges his listeners to wake up to the danger of annihilation that threatened the entire nation because they were failing to receive the good news of God's reign of peace. "Unless you repent, you will perish just as they did" (Luke 13:5).

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he addresses another fatal temptation in religion—making a certain spiritual identity into a false guarantee of impunity. Some members in the Corinth church apparently imagined that baptism was



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a license for continued sexual exploitation, presumably because merely physical actions couldn't impinge in any way on the purity of the enlightened soul. Paul applies forceful lessons to the contrary through an imaginative exploration of calamities undergone by the generation who had been liberated in the Exodus but wouldn't stay faithful.

[MARCH 31]

Prodigal Church?

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32;
2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

THE PARABLE OF the prodigal son (more accurately, the parable of the resentful elder brother) was Jesus' mordant challenge to the orthodox who took deep offense at his practice of amnesty and inclusion. Jesus constituted his "little flock," to whom it was God's good pleasure to entrust the divine reign, from a motley crew of tax collectors, prostitutes, and others who were despicable in the eyes of decent folk. The parable's resonance is inexhaustible. I am haunted by the way Robert Adolfs, a radical Dutch theologian

and author of *The Grave of God*, used the image of the prodigal spending his years in a far country as a devastating image for the entire sweep of church history—from the conversion of Constantine to our day. The church's alliance with regimes of power, its establishments, its consent to violence, its dependence on structures of privilege, constituted a devastating repudiation of the good news of nonviolent, self-giving divine love, for which the prodigal's heartbreaking abandonment of his father and home is a poignant image. The father could not constrain his younger son, and for centuries a noncoercive God lets the church persist in its compromises until disillusionment finally sets in and the moment comes round for risking the painful journey home.

Perhaps the parable can speak to us now of the joy of God in welcoming back a chastened, humiliated Christian church, stripped of its obsolete cultural support systems, to enjoy again the original inheritance of the gospel of grace. ■

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

Is There Something I'm Forgetting?

ONE OF THE disadvantages of living a long life is that you forget much of it. Parts of the past are a closed book to a deteriorating memory, although I *do* remember every single embarrassing moment when I should have kept my mouth shut but didn't, falsely thinking at the time that a clever remark about, say, a person's lamentable haircut would be both humorous and instructive, and generally enjoyed by all. Unfortunately, those excruciating social misdeemeanors number, at last count, in the millions and lay in the forefront of my consciousness while other more important things—such as, what 8 times 7 equals—I have long forgotten. It's the normal consequence of aging, but these days what you don't remember could hurt you.

For example, have I ever lied to Robert Mueller?

I'VE NEVER MET Robert Mueller, and I'm pretty sure I've never been in the same room with the man. But I can't be certain.

Unlike our president, I've never made payments to an adult film actress or Playboy playmate. But does memory really serve? I admit



Anyway, a young Robert Mueller wasn't there at the time, observing with a stern eye, carefully documenting my actions for use in future judicial proceedings. At least, I don't think he was. But can I really be sure?

TO REPEAT, I've never paid hush money, but I have paid for hush puppies. Would Mueller see the distinction? Or is his investigation so broad as to sweep up every malfeasance, every gaff, blunder, or snafu? Given my tendency for social indiscretion, it's likely I have even slipped up in front of the FBI. (I once met an FBI agent at a party. I noticed the holster lump around his ankle and made a humorous remark about him being "glad to see me," but he didn't laugh. Is that in my FBI file? Do I even *have* an FBI file?)

And what about the Russians? Mueller has been poking around for the last two years, looking for connections to Moscow, investigating collusion by people in Washington, D.C.

I live in Washington, D.C., but my only connection to the former Soviet Union is the Russian nesting doll I keep in my study. I don't recall where it came from, but is its possession evidence of collusion? It looks pretty innocent on that shelf, but I admit there's more to it than meets the eye. There is a built-in

covertness to this particular curio, one that reveals itself over time, in a methodical sequence of actions that slowly exposes the objects hidden within. All except for the last one, which I'm pretty sure rolled under the radiator a while back, its thick coating of dust a powerful deterrent to anyone reaching under there with a bare hand. Presumably, FBI agents will use synthetic gloves when retrieving this and other incriminating evidence when they come to my home. (I'll try breaking the tension with another "glad to see me" quip. Maybe they'll laugh *this time*.)

I KNOW, I'M taking this Mueller thing too far, second-guessing my own life. It's a highly developed paranoia, fed by constantly checking my news feeds, grasping at each *New York Times* bulletin with the neediness of a child. I can't sleep and can hardly do my work without logging in to political news. I'm binge-watching history in real time, and it's *Breaking Bad*, but without the funny parts.

I need an antidote for this slow poisoning of the spirit, something to calm me down.

I know, I'll just take a reassuring peek at my 401(k). That is, if I can remember my password ... ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

Maybe a grand jury will help me remember.

I have seen *Playboy* magazine, the first time when I was 12, well before the age of consent and possibly in violation of local morality laws at the time. But copies were just lying on the little table in the barbershop, and since I had already read the old issues of *Field & Stream*, I decided to leaf through a different publication.

Instead of seizing it from my fingers, quelling my innocent curiosity, and using the moment to teach an important life lesson about the clear demarcations of youth, the barbers just giggled.



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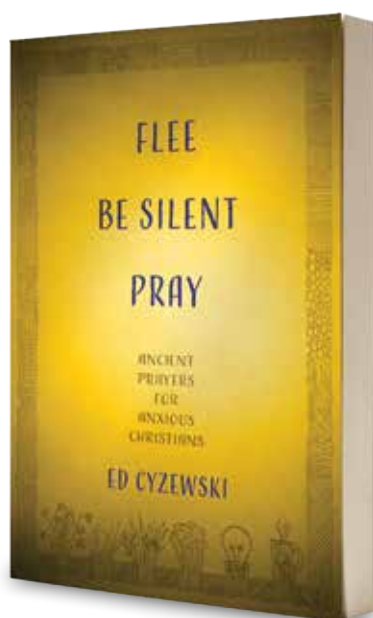
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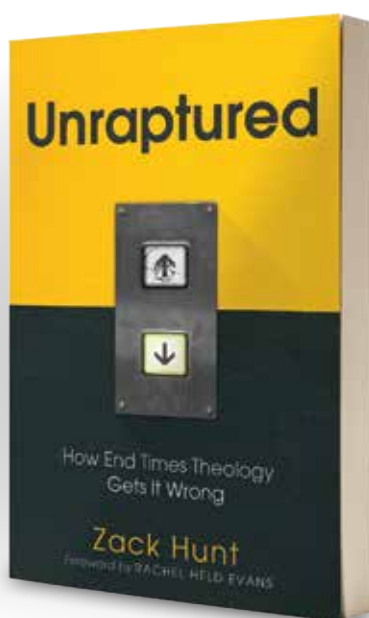
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